

**POST-TRUTH POLITICS:
DISINFORMATION THROUGH
ALTERNATIVE INFORMATION STREAMS**

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A thesis submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts

Baltimore, Maryland
December 2019

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Abstract

The Information Age has brought numerous consequences and quickly launched us into a Post Truth era. In this new era, disinformation spreads farther than ever in mere seconds. This thesis looks into the issue of disinformation in the Post Truth era by looking at three alternative information streams that are often used to spread disinformation and how they affect the American political process. These alternative information streams affect public opinion, elections, and policy agendas by targeting people through emotions and entertainment.

This thesis looks into the effects of soft news, memes, and conspiracy theories by analyzing six scenarios. These scenarios include Jimmy Kimmel's plea for the Affordable Care Act in 2017, John Oliver's plea for net neutrality in 2014, the Occupy movement, the alt-right movement, Russian disinformation in the 2016 election cycle, and the birtherism conspiracy. Public polling, Congressional and Presidential responses, research papers, and news articles will be used to analyze the effects of these scenarios.

This research found that disinformation is often more effective at affecting American political attitudes than facts because it is more emotional and entertaining. This research shows that alternative information streams are important and potentially dangerous channels of information sharing. Due to the speed by which disinformation can travel on the internet, an American and worldwide approach to internet regulation will be necessary going forward in the 21st century to combat disinformation.

Advisors: Dr. Jacob Straus and Dr. Adam Wolfson of Johns Hopkins University Advanced Academic Programs

Preface

I would first like to thank my two thesis professors, Dr. Jacob Straus and Dr. Adam Wolfson of Johns Hopkins University. Drs. Straus and Wolfson provided invaluable critique and guidance on my thesis and writing process.

I would also like to thank Professor Matt Laslo of Johns Hopkins University for his inspiring course on politics and the media that resulted in the inspiration for this thesis.

Finally, I must acknowledge my deep gratitude to my fiancé, Tony, for his endless encouragement and support throughout my studies and thesis process, as well as my family and my soon-to-be in-laws for their encouragement along the way.

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Introduction

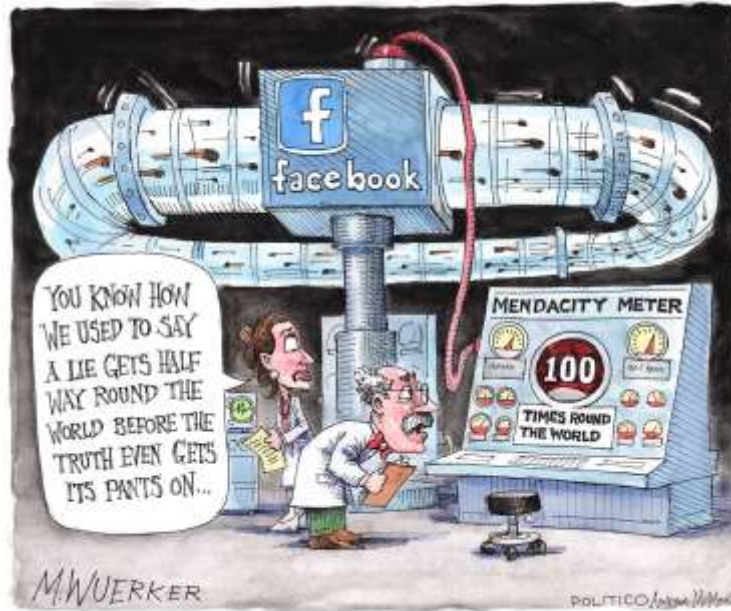
The chaos of the 2016 U.S. presidential elections highlighted a massive shift in American political culture. While this trend has been growing since the early days of the internet, this chaos finally pushed the United States out of the Information Age and into a new era. By the end of 2016, scholars and journalists would come to call this the Post-Truth era. This new era is defined by the public's abandonment of objective truth and its embrace of personal belief and emotion.¹

In 2018, researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology quantified this phenomenon when they found that false information and claims were 70% more likely to be shared online than true information.² The same study showed that true information could take up to six times as long as a falsehood to reach over one thousand people. The common thread throughout these spreadable falsehoods were emotions, especially those of surprise and disgust. While some falsehoods are merely misinformation, or unintended falsehoods, many spreadable falsehoods today are intentionally manipulated and are therefore disinformation.

Now, in the midst of the 2020 presidential election cycle, Americans must brace themselves for more political upheaval and disinformation. In October 2019, *Politico* political cartoonist, Matt Wuerker illustrated this concern in the following piece.

¹ Midgley, Neil. "Word of the Year 2016 is..." *Oxford Dictionary*. Nov. 2016, <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>

² Lohr, Steve. "It's True: False News Spreads Faster and Wider. And Humans are to Blame." *New York Times*. 8 Mar. 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/08/technology/twitter-fake-news-research.html>



Matt Wuerker - *Politico*³

This image depicts falsehoods and disinformation spreading around the world through a highspeed Facebook hyperloop and highlights one of the most concerning trends of the decade, the spread of disinformation around the world through social media.

Disinformation, like propaganda and conspiracy theories, has been around longer than the United States has been a country, but the advent of the internet and proliferation of social media has magnified its strength and effect. Disinformation is not just for the gullible though, it affects reach everyone, from children on social media to the President of the United States.⁴

Disinformation is making waves in American politics, yet some researchers argue that we, as a country, are doing nothing about it.⁵ Disinformation is often spread through alternative or marginalized information streams like soft news, memes, and conspiracy

³ Wuerker, Matt. "Mendacity Meter." Cartoon. *Politico*. 8 Oct. 2019, <https://www.politico.com/gallery/2019/10/08/matt-wuerker-cartoons-october-2019-003669?slide=1>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Mayer, Jane. "The Invention of the Conspiracy Theory on Biden and Ukraine." *New Yorker*. 4 Oct. 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-invention-of-the-conspiracy-theory-on-biden-and-ukraine>

theories. This thesis will look into these alternative information streams and highlight the effects they can have on the American political process. Alternative information streams affect public opinion, elections, and policy agendas by targeting people through emotions and entertainment.

Alternative information streams, like the ones covered in this thesis, are often entertaining or emotionally triggering. By definition, soft news is entertaining, focusing on interesting situations and commentary instead of facts and important issues.⁶ Internet memes are entertaining, interactive, and can even trigger emotions. Finally, conspiracy theories find people in vulnerable positions and target one of the strongest emotions, fear.

These characteristics of alternative information streams are what makes them effective and dangerous to our democracy, especially in post-truth politics. In chapter one, this thesis discusses how Americans, more so than many other Western countries, tend to base their political opinions on feelings rather than facts.⁷ Therefore, mediums that target feelings have the potential to impact public opinion more than hard news sources.

Alternative information streams have the power to sway public opinion, but unlike hard news sources, are not held up to same journalistic integrity. Soft news is profit-driven, not fact-driven. Memes are meant to be entertaining, not scholarly. Finally, conspiracy theories are often built on claims that the conspirator is trying to control people through hard news, and they tell people not to trust the facts. These aspects make these streams ideal for disinformation to spread and cause harm to our democracy.

⁶ Tuchman, Gaye. "Making News by Doing Work: Routinizing the Unexpected." *American Journal of Psychology* 73, No. 1, University of Chicago Press, (July 1973), 114.

⁷ Taber, Charles S. "Political Cognition and Public Opinion." In *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media*, edited by Robert Y. Shapiro and Lawrence R. Jacobs. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 369.

Therefore, in order to fight against the oncoming surge of disinformation, we must understand it. This thesis will look into three alternative information streams and describe how they are affecting American politics. This thesis adds to existing research by expanding on current theories that emotions and entertainment affect political opinions by providing different types of entertainment and emotionally-based information streams. Identifying these alternative information streams and their effects is an important step in solving the problem of disinformation. The final section of this thesis will conclude with recommendations for fighting the disinformation battle and provide areas of future research.

This thesis studies these streams and their effects by focusing on six scenarios and analyzing polling data, research papers, Congressional responses, policy changes, blogs, timelines, news articles, and interviews. The second and third chapters each look into multiple scenarios and compare and contrast the findings from each scenario. The third chapter takes a deeper look at a single scenario and tracks the impact of the theory throughout its history.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter One – Infotainment: Late-Night Hosts and Policy Change

Chapter one takes a look at soft news by studying the effects that late-night comedy hosts have on policies in America. Late-night hosts can affect public opinion and policy by highlighting issues, educating their audiences on those issues, and by earning public trust.

As mentioned earlier, entertainment is an effective avenue to grab the attention of an audience and sway opinions. The literature review in this chapter delves into the reasons behind why entertainment is effective at influencing opinions. First, soft news grabs the audience's attention. This is done through non-political entertainment. Then, when the host

explains a policy or position, the viewer is more likely to absorb that information through passive learning. The entertainment aspect of the show even serves as a primer to help the viewer retain the information. Finally, that information can have an effect on the viewer's attitudes about a candidate or political participation. Sometimes this impact is positive, encouraging viewers to get involved. While other times, it can lead to voter apathy and dissuade viewers from participation due to increased cynicism.

After public opinion shifts, political participation can then go on to affect policies. Public opinion is a powerful force in the United States and it has a large impact on political decision making. Increased access to public opinion data guides policy-making and policy-makers are often cautious to defy public opinion.

This chapter follows how late-night comedy hosts affect policy by looking at two scenarios and applying these characteristics. The first scenario looks at *Jimmy Kimmel Live* host, Jimmy Kimmel, and his 2017 plea to save the Affordable Care Act (ACA). The second case looks at *Last Week Tonight* host, John Oliver, and his 2014 plea to protect net neutrality.

Kimmel's plea centered around his newborn son's health. After returning from a week-long absence, he announced that his son had been born with a heart defect that required numerous surgeries. After his emotional, heartfelt story, Kimmel then launched into a rant about a bill in the U.S. House that would abolish the ACA. The bill made it out of the House, but Kimmel's rant went viral. Republican Senators were asked about Kimmel on live programming and some addressed his rant head-on. A back-and-forth then ensued that consisted of multiple rants on Kimmel's part and retorts from Republican Senators. In the end, the Senate was unable to pass a repeal bill by the deadline to pass with a simple majority.

Oliver's case was less personal. His plea for net neutrality was a part of his show's structured content of providing deep dives into obscure political topics. Oliver even admitted at the beginning of his segment that he was going to be covering an incredibly boring topic. He then turned the boring topic into a humorous thirteen-minute viral video filled with educational content on the issue. Oliver even included a task for viewers at the end of the segment telling them to go to the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) website and leave a comment. By the next morning, the site had crashed. Over the next few weeks, grassroots organizations that were fighting to keep net neutrality shared Oliver's clip in order to inform citizens and gain support. When the vote came in early 2015, net neutrality was safe and activists came forward to thank Oliver for his help in the debate.

These two cases illustrated many of the characteristics listed earlier. They both used entertainment, and in Kimmel's case, emotion, to grab their audience's attention. They then educated their viewers on complex issues. Polls about net neutrality even showed that Oliver's show was more effective at educating viewers on the issue than hard news shows. Finally, their pleas impacted public opinion. In Kimmel's case, more Americans stated that they trusted Kimmel on this issue more than Congress. In both cases, the hosts were able to help save the policies from being abolished.

While Oliver's information was highly factual, Kimmel often mischaracterized statements from Republican Senators and led audiences to believe that they made promises that they did not. Because Kimmel is not a journalist on a hard news show, he was not held up to the same standards as a journalist and therefore not held accountable for these mischaracterizations. This shows late-night comedy's capacity to spread disinformation, especially in the hands of someone with more malicious intent than Kimmel.

Chapter Two – Propaganda: Memeing Politics

Chapter two continues looking at entertaining media by studying political internet memes. This chapter studies the creators and sharers of these memes and the motives behind it all. Individuals and governments use memes as a form of political participation and to unite political bases to an ideology.

This chapter expands on the research highlighted in chapter one that revealed that entertaining and emotional media affects political opinions and political participation. Memes fit into this media type as their use and spread are predicated in humor and emotion. Memes, by definition, are information vessels, delivering complex meaning and feeling in a simple, spreadable, and mixable format.

While internet memes have been around since the early days of the internet, political internet memes are a newer and growing phenomenon. As late as the 2008 U.S. presidential election, memes were still only used to highlight gaffes that were already viral on their own. In 2012, memes separated into their own genre of political participation, building up or tearing down candidates one share at a time. By 2016, memes had soared beyond innocent, entertaining participatory media and into the sinister forms of information warfare.

Within the past decade, the definition of political participation has grown to include internet and social media activity like sharing memes. However, while creating and sharing political internet memes counts as its own form of participation, it also inspires more active participation. Researchers argue that memes satisfy important characteristics that influence more participation.

First, memes act as a form of grassroots persuasion. Studies have shown that online content created by average individuals is viewed and shared at rates more than ten times that

of party sponsored content. Second, memes help groups to organize outside of mainstream channels. Finally, memes help unite groups behind an ideology while still allowing people to express their individuality.

This chapter focuses on these aspects and looks into how individuals and governments harness these characteristics for their own situations by looking at three movements. First, it looks at one of the first movements that intentionally used political internet memes, Occupy Wall Street. Second, it looks at the alt-right and its use of memes leading up to and beyond the 2016 election cycle. Finally, it looks at Russia's use of memes in an information warfare campaign against the United States.

The first scenario this chapter looks at is the Occupy movement. This movement was started by an advertising expert who understood the power of imagery. He was eventually joined by the online hacktivist group, Anonymous, who helped spread his idea of the power of imagery by asking people to share their own experiences in photos online. This combination gave birth to the "We are the 99 percent" meme that was shared around the world and help create Occupy movements in over 82 countries. The Occupy movement eventually died, but the unification of ideology left a lasting impact on the political Left in the United States.

The second scenario dives deeper into meme culture, looking at the alt-right's origin and use of memes to spread its ideology. This movement was started by the head of a white nationalist think tank. He amassed early followers through his blogs and journals, but eventually, he gained the majority of his followers through anonymous social media sites where users could share their extreme beliefs without the world knowing who they were. Alt-right adherents used these pages to create and share memes that explained their beliefs. When

Donald Trump announced his campaign for president, these groups quickly jumped on board and used memes to show their support. For the alt-right, memes acted as gateway media into its ideology and still acts as a recruitment tool for young followers.

The final scenario shows how a government can use memes to influence another country's populace. This section looks at Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) and its information warfare campaign against the United States. The IRA was created by the Russian government with the purpose of causing division and distrust in the American democratic process. The IRA used memes to attract people to its many Facebook and Twitter pages and then used those pages to suppress voting amongst African Americans and increase tensions amongst fringe groups. It is even likely that the IRA intentionally increased tensions between rival groups at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia that led to violence and the death of a young woman.

These three scenarios show how memes can be used for much more beyond laughs and shares. The organizers of these scenarios used memes to eschew traditional media outlets and unite individuals under their causes. In each scenario, followers were encouraged to create and share their own memes to participate but then pushed further to participate in the real world. Memes allowed for these organizers to push back against hard news sources and tell their own stories, even if that story was toxic or manipulative.

Chapter Three – Conspiracy Theory: Birtherism and President Obama

Chapter three goes deeper into the web of disinformation by looking into conspiracy theories. This chapter focuses on the effects that a conspiracy theory can have on a politician's candidacy and policy objectives while in office. A conspiracy theory can affect a

candidate's campaign and policy objectives by distracting from the issues and inflaming public distrust.

While the last two chapters focused on the methods for spreading disinformation, this chapter focuses on the message itself. Conspiracy theories are one of the ultimate forms of disinformation. Not only is it usually false, but it also causes fear and distrust. Conspiracy theories, however, are largely stigmatized and therefore less research has been conducted on them. It can also be difficult to distinguish real conspiratorial events from conspiracy theories. Some theories that started out sounding outlandish were later discovered to be true.

Even though conspiracy theories are widely believed to exist on the margins of society, some scholars argue that they are an integral part of American culture and that almost everyone has succumbed to one or another. Some studies found that conspiracy theories are interwoven into American discourse on race, education, and politics. Their targets are not just those with vulnerable mental pathologies but are people in positions and feelings of powerlessness.

This chapter traces the history of conspiracy theory in America, beginning all the way back in Colonial America when colonists felt powerless and voiceless against the distant monarchy. The growth of conspiracy theory in America was slow and steady until the assassination of President Kennedy. This moment opened the conspiracy floodgates and brought the theories out of the margins and into the mainstream. By 2009, over two-thirds of Americans believed that the JFK assassination was tied to a conspiracy.

The birth and rise of the internet both happened in an America filled with distrust, and the internet became a place for theories to flourish and spread. Theories now turned their attention to politicians and policies, potentially affecting them in their wake.

Most researchers have claimed that conspiracy theories are likely harmful, but few have provided evidence of the harm. This chapter looks into the potential harm by looking at one conspiracy theory, in particular, the Obama birtherism theory. This theory claimed that President Obama was not born in the United States and was therefore ineligible to serve as president.

This chapter traces the beginning of the theory from a message board from 2004 to 2016, when one of the theory's main supporters, Donald Trump, announced that he no longer believed the theory. Through polling and press releases, this chapter shows that the birtherism theory affected the Obama campaign as well as his policy objectives by distracting the public from his narrative and sowing distrust in potential voters.

While Obama is no longer the sitting president, the theory lives on. As recently as June 2019, President Trump's son, Donald Trump Jr. tweeted a similar birther claim about Senator Kamala Harris shortly after she experienced a polling spike in the Democratic primaries.⁸

The exciting Information Age brought with it many unintended and unpredictable consequences. The huge technological breakthrough of the internet mirror and expand upon the breakthrough of the printing press. After the creation of the printing press, consequences and regulation took over one hundred years to surface.⁹ The internet, however, brought exponentially faster speeds of information sharing, causing consequences like disinformation to arrive even sooner. Disinformation is and will be one of the biggest challenges facing our democracy over the next century. Over the next few chapters, this thesis will break down

⁸ Taylor, Derrick Bryson. "Kamala Harris is Supported by Rivals After Trump Jr. Questions her Race." *New York Times*. 29 Jun. 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/29/us/politics/kamala-harris-race-trump.html>

⁹ Dewar, James A. "The Information Age and the Printing Press." *Rand Corporation*. 1998. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/P8014/index2.html#fnb1>

some of the most influential avenues for spreading disinformation and highlight the effects of these avenues. In the conclusion, this thesis will focus on recommendations and potential areas for future research.

Infotainment: Late-Night Hosts and Policy Change

Introduction

Politicians discovered the use of soft news television for garnering support and pushing policies decades ago, from then-Governor Bill Clinton playing the saxophone on Arsenio Hall in 1992 to President Barack Obama pushing enrollment in the Affordable Care Act (ACA) on the YouTube show “Between Two Ferns” in 2014.¹⁰

By appearing on late-night shows, politicians can push their policies onto far more viewers than on traditional news programs. When Obama appeared on *Letterman* in 2015, he earned twice the audience that he had earned the night before on *This Week with George Stephanopoulos*.¹¹ These appearances suggest that these politicians believe that late-night shows are a useful platform for pushing their policies, so what effect do late-night hosts have when they use their own show to push a policy? Late-night hosts can affect public opinion and policy by highlighting issues, educating their audiences on those issues, and by earning public trust.

This chapter will attempt to describe these effects through an examination of previous research and analysis of two events. The first event will cover the effect that Jimmy

¹⁰ Kolbert, Elizabeth. “THE 1992 CAMPAIGN: Media; Whistle-Stops a la 1992: Arsenio, Larry and Phil” *New York Times*. 5 Jun. 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/05/us/the-1992-campaign-media-whistle-stops-a-la-1992-arsenio-larry-and-phil.html?auth=login-email>; Eilperin, Juliet. “Remember when Zach Galifianakis asked Obama about being ‘the last black president’? How that happened.” *Washington Post*. 16 Aug. 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/obama-legacy/funny-or-die-video-history.html>

¹¹ Baum, Matthew A., and Angela S. Jamison. “Soft News and the Four Oprah Effects.” In *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media*, edited by Robert Y. Shapiro and Lawrence R. Jacobs. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 121.

Kimmel's plea for healthcare in 2017 had on the attempted overthrow of the ACA.¹² The second event will look at the effect that John Oliver had on net neutrality policy in 2014.¹³ It will use responses from members of Congress, pleas from constituents, and ultimately actual policy change to describe the effects. Finally, this chapter will breakdown the results from this research.

The terms "soft news" and "hard news" will be used frequently in this section and, therefore, need to be defined. Hard news and soft news are typically defined against one another as they exist as each other's opposite. Hard news takes a factual approach and typically covers the objective, important issues. Soft news, on the other hand, covers more subjective and interesting situations with a focus on entertainment.¹⁴

Previous Research

Political Knowledge

Extensive research has been conducted on the relationship between public opinion and the media. This research suggests that opinions on public policy and politics are not easily swayed by media coverage but that a person's own beliefs, affiliations, and interests hold a much stronger role.¹⁵ Conversely, soft news audiences, such as the audience of *Letterman*, tend to be less politically engaged, leaving them open for more political influence.¹⁶ Thus giving soft news a potential to influence a portion of the electorate.

¹² Bruner, Raisa. "Read Jimmy Kimmel's Moving Healthcare Monologue That Everyone's Talking About." *Time*. 20 Sep. 2017, <https://time.com/4949522/jimmy-kimmel-healthcare-transcript/>

¹³ McDonald, Soraya Nadia. "John Oliver's net neutrality rant may have caused FCC site crash." *Washington Post*. 4 Jun. 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/06/04/john-olivers-net-neutrality-rant-may-have-caused-fcc-site-crash/?utm_term=.c7a176af8aa0

¹⁴ Tuchman, Gaye. "Making News by Doing Work: Routinizing the Unexpected." *American Journal of Psychology* 73, No. 1, University of Chicago Press, (July 1973), 114.

¹⁵ Jacobs, Lawrence R., and Robert Y. Shapiro. "Informational Interdependence: Public Opinion and the Media in the New Communications Era." In *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media*, edited by Robert Y. Shapiro and Lawrence R. Jacobs. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11.

¹⁶ Baum, Matthew A., and Angela S. Jamison. "Soft News and the Four Oprah Effects." 121.

The average citizen obtains his or her political knowledge through the media. However, according to Stanford University political science professor, Shanto Iyengar, Americans tend to be less politically informed than Europeans. He argued that this phenomenon occurs because publicly-funded European news sources focus more on hard news while news sources in the United States focus on the more entertaining stories, i.e. soft news, in order to drive in more profit. This style of bottom-line driven news in America has only increased over the years.¹⁷ However, taking some blame off of hard news sources, Americans rank political news to be of the lowest interest, especially in the younger crowds.¹⁸ Possibly as a result of being provided less hard news, Americans tend to shape their political opinions less off of facts and more heuristically.¹⁹

This lack of information and heuristic opinion-forming provides soft news with power. During the 2016 election cycle, 78% of individuals stated that they learned about the presidential elections through television and 25% of those individuals learned about the candidates through late-night comedy shows.²⁰ Researchers like Harvard public policy professor, Matthew Baum, and sociology scholar, Angela Jamison, claimed that while highly engaged individuals are mostly unaffected by soft news, those who are more unengaged tend to absorb the information as a part of their heuristic opinion forming.²¹

¹⁷ Iyengar, Shanto. *Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide*. 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 239-242; Bennett, Lance W. *News: The Politics of Illusion*. 8th ed. (New York: Pearson Education, 2009), 22.

¹⁸ Bennett, Lance W. *News: The Politics of Illusion*, 18.

¹⁹ Iyengar, Shanto. *Media Politics*, 240.

²⁰ Mitchell, Amy, et. al. "The 2016 Presidential Campaign – a News Event That's Hard to Miss." *Pew Research Center*. 4 Feb. 2016, <https://www.journalism.org/2016/02/04/the-2016-presidential-campaign-a-news-event-thats-hard-to-miss/>

²¹ Baum, Matthew A., and Angela S. Jamison. "Soft News and the Four Oprah Effects." 123.

Soft News

Previous research by Baum and Jamison helped to define how and why soft news programs exert more influence. Their research on demand-side political effects explained that soft news programs like talk shows and late-night shows prime the audience through attention, knowledge, attitude, and behavior.²²

First, soft news programs like late-night comedy shows, grab the attention of viewers through non-political entertainment like celebrity gossip or jokes. Baum claimed that through the *Incidental- By-product* model, political information is “piggybacking” onto topics that the viewers are more interested in.²³ This is especially true for politically uninterested individuals because when political information is attached to soft news it does not decrease the entertainment value of the program.²⁴

Second, Baum argued that soft news increases political knowledge by providing a conduit of passive learning, even if the viewer does not care about the issue.²⁵ Oberlin College Professor of politics Michael Parkin’s research on John Kerry’s appearance on *Letterman* in 2004 highlighted a priming effect that soft news can also have on political learning. His research revealed that individuals who either watched Kerry perform on *Letterman* or read the transcript on the *Letterman* website had better recall of the topics discussed than those who read the same transcript off of hard news website, *Face the Nation*.²⁶ Therefore, through passive learning and priming, soft news increases the political knowledge of politically unengaged individuals.

²² Ibid., 123-130.

²³ Ibid., 123-124.

²⁴ Baum, Matthew A., *Soft News Goes to War: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy in the New Media Age*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 30-31.

²⁵ Baum, Matthew A., and Angela S. Jamison. “Soft News and the Four Oprah Effects.” 125.

²⁶ Parkin, Michael. “Taking Late Night Comedy Seriously: How Candidate Appearances on Late Night Television Can Engage Viewers.” *Political Research Quarterly* 63, No. 1, (March 2010): 11.

Third, in order to demonstrate an actual effect, soft news must show an ability to affect viewers' attitudes in a meaningful way.²⁷ This is an aspect that many researchers disagree on. Baum's research, specifically on day-time talk shows, indicated that candidates who appear on these shows experience an increase in likeability after the program airs.²⁸ His research also revealed that this increased likeability helps politically unengaged voters align with candidates that better match their interests.²⁹ In his research on soft news and foreign policy, he argued that there is a clear association between soft news coverage of the wars and increasing beliefs in isolationism, especially amongst politically unengaged individuals.³⁰ Furthermore, temporary increases in political knowledge can have an impact on opinion. Iyengar's research claimed that Americans make opinions on information that is later forgotten, leaving only the opinion.³¹ Baum explained this same phenomenon by explaining that political details carry an emotional "charge", and when the information is forgotten, the charge remains.³² Political psychology researcher, Charles Taber, similarly argued that Americans construct their political attitudes off of the moment rather than from facts.³³ This leads to the possibility that political knowledge gained through soft news could leave a lasting impact on political opinion.

In contrast, researchers like East Carolina University political science professors, Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris, argued that watching late-night comedy shows either

²⁷ Baum, Matthew A., and Angela S. Jamison. "Soft News and the Four Oprah Effects." 127.

²⁸ Ibid., 127.

²⁹ Ibid., 129.

³⁰ Baum, Matthew A., *Soft News Goes to War: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy in the New Media Age*, 256-257.

³¹ Iyengar, Shanto. *Media Politics*, 240.

³² Baum, Matthew A., and Angela S. Jamison. "Soft News and the Four Oprah Effects." 126.

³³ Taber, Charles S. "Political Cognition and Public Opinion." In *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media*, edited by Robert Y. Shapiro and Lawrence R. Jacobs. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 369.

had no effect on likeability or even led to increased political cynicism and increased a dislike for both political candidates during a presidential election.³⁴ Author Russell Peterson disagreed with this and argued that certain late-night shows increased cynicism, but that others had the opposite effect. He distinguished between two types of late-night comedy. He claimed that typical late-night comedy promoted cynicism by attempting to remain objective and fair, criticizing both sides of the political spectrum equally. However, the more targeted, polemic late-night comedy shows, like that of *The Daily Show*, acted as a form of advocacy.³⁵ Therefore, when comedians act as equal opportunity offenders, they make the whole system look deficient. However, when they are more targeted, they effectively provide their audience a target for their frustration.

Finally, increased attention, knowledge, and altered attitudes mean little in politics if they do not affect an individual's behavior. Research on individuals who got most of their information on the 2004 elections from late-night comedy shows revealed that there was a positive correlation between joining an organization or attending a campaign event and watching late-night comedy.³⁶

Policy Impact and Public Opinion

When it comes to public opinion, the media has at least some control over what citizens think and care about. An issue can exist for years unnoticed, but as soon as the media focuses on it, it enters the public's conscience and can then become a public concern. Iyengar referred to this phenomenon as "agenda-setting".³⁷ John Mueller argued that agenda setting

³⁴ Baumgartner, Jody, and Jonathan S. Morris. "The Daily Show Effect Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and American Youth." *American Politics Research* 34, no. 3 (May 2006): 358-359.

³⁵ Peterson, Russell L., *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 203-207.

³⁶ Cao, Xiaoxia, and Paul R. Brewer. "Political Comedy Shows and Public Participation in Politics." *Oxford University Press*. Vol. 20, No.1, 2008, pp. 96-97.

³⁷ Iyengar, Shanto. *Media Politics*, 242.

can have a substantial impact, moving once top tier issues to almost forgotten issues in short time periods.³⁸

A number of scholars have noted public opinion's ability to impact policy change. Even as far back as the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville acknowledged the power of public opinion in America, calling it the "dominant power."³⁹ Baum noted that this has led political candidates to appear more often on soft news programs in order to control the narrative.⁴⁰ Those that do not control the narrative could just as easily fall victim to what satirist Harry Shearer referred to as the "Dan Quayle effect." Shearer explained that comedians could zero in so severely that it could seal the politician's political fate. He stated, "If you are ridiculed too often on those shows, it's a death warrant. It's why I thought Clinton was going to have to resign."⁴¹ While President Clinton did not ultimately resign due to the Dan Quayle effect, the impact that late-night comedy had on Dan Quayle's political career remains undefined but potentially significant.⁴²

Public opinion data and its increasing accessibility have helped policymakers align policies with public interests over the past few decades. When policies or political decisions differ from public opinion, the public often responds with furor, demanding justification.⁴³ Therefore, soft news, as a public opinion driver, is also potentially steering public policy.

³⁸ Mueller, John. "Public Opinion, the Media, and War." In *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media*, edited by Robert Y. Shapiro and Lawrence R. Jacobs. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 678.

³⁹ Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America* 1, ed. J.P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence. (1838; repr., New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 124.

⁴⁰ Baum, Matthew A., *Soft News Goes to War: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy in the New Media Age*, 282-283.

⁴¹ Brownfield, Paul. "Cheap Shots at a Steep Price?" *Los Angeles Times*. 27 Aug. 2000, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-aug-27-ca-11045-story.html>

⁴² Peterson, Russell L., *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke*, 82-83.

⁴³ Shapiro, Robert Y. and Lawrence R. Jacobs. "The Democratic Paradox: The Waning of Popular Sovereignty and the Pathologies of American Politics." In *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media*, edited by Robert Y. Shapiro and Lawrence R. Jacobs. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 714-715.

When it comes to impacting policy change, viewers' attitudes and behaviors may not be the only important factor. Columbia University professor of journalism, Michael Schudson, noted that Reagan was less successful at swaying public opinion than he was at swaying Congress. Because Congress was under the assumption that television had a large impact on public opinion, they believed that Reagan's numerous appearances influenced voters. This encouraged Congress to work with the president on more issues.⁴⁴ Therefore, in certain situations, a perceived impact of soft news could possibly do more to affect congressional opinion and action than an actual public impact.

The bulk of research on soft news influence has been conducted on political knowledge, agenda-setting, and public opinion. This chapter aims to add to this research by highlighting specific policy and political issues covered by soft news hosts in two situations by two different late-night comedy hosts. It will cover the audience and agenda-setting and then evaluate the effect that these had on public opinion and ultimately policy change.

Methodology

In order to research the effect of late-night hosts on policy, I have selected two hosts with different styles to research. Jimmy Kimmel was chosen because before the referenced incident, his style of comedy did not focus directly on politics.⁴⁵ Conversely, John Oliver was chosen for his commercial-free, polemic, laser focus on obscure political issues.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Schudson, Michael. *The Power of News*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 122-123.

⁴⁵ Rutenberg, Jim. "Colbert, Kimmel and the Politics of Late Night." *New York Times*. 24 Sep. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/24/business/colbert-kimmel-and-the-politics-of-late-night.html>; Garber, Megan. "The Anger of Jimmy Kimmel." *Atlantic*. 20 Sep. 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/09/jimmy-kimmel-health-insurance-video/540441/>

⁴⁶ Bonazzo, John, "And Now, This: How John Oliver's 'Legally Spicy' Show Has Changed the Media Landscape." *Observer*, 23 Mar. 2018, <https://observer.com/2018/03/how-john-oliver-effect-changed-news/>

The two situations that will be covered are Jimmy Kimmel's plea for healthcare policy in 2017 and John Oliver's appeal for net neutrality in 2014. The effects of these situations will be measured through polling data, Congressional response, and policy change.

Data

Jimmy Kimmel vs. the 2017 Health Care Bill

On May 1, 2017, Jimmy Kimmel reappeared on his show, *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, after an unexplained, week-long absence. Kimmel emotionally explained that one week earlier, his wife had given birth to a son with severe heart defects. He explained that the ordeal had affected him and his wife greatly, but reassured his audience that their child was provided with the necessary health care and was doing well. Kimmel then launched into a more politically pointed speech. He turned his attention towards President Trump and the Republican party's attempted repeal of the ACA, and more specifically the pre-existing medical conditions clause.⁴⁷ Kimmel stated,

We were brought up to believe that we live in the greatest country in the world, but until a few years ago, millions and millions of us had no access to health insurance at all. Before 2014, if you were born with congenital heart disease like my son was, there was a good chance you'd never be able to get health insurance because you had a pre-existing condition. You were born with a pre-existing condition. And if your parents didn't have medical insurance, you might not live long enough to even get denied because of a pre-existing condition.

⁴⁷ Russonello, Giovanni. "Jimmy Kimmel's Emotional Monologue: His New Son's Heart Condition." *New York Times*. 2 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/02/arts/television/jimmy-kimmel-baby-son-wife.html>

If your baby is going to die, and it doesn't have to, it shouldn't matter how much money you make. I think that's something that, whether you're a Republican or a Democrat or something else, we all agree on that, right?⁴⁸

Three days later, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill that would gut the ACA and remove the pre-existing medical conditions clause.⁴⁹ The next day, Republican Louisiana Senator Bill Cassidy coined the phrase “Jimmy Kimmel test” when he appeared on *CNN*. Senator Cassidy, who is also a physician, stated that he would not support the bill if it did not pass the “Jimmy Kimmel test” by supporting children under one year of age with pre-existing conditions. Cassidy added that he would personally work to implement the plan.⁵⁰

However, former Speaker of the House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich, went on the offensive. Gingrich criticized Kimmel's response, claiming it was not factual and then went on to claim that late-night comedians were no longer funny due to their hatred of President Trump.⁵¹ On Kimmel's Monday night show, he attacked the former Speaker's comments as well as the negative coverage in articles from the *Washington Times* and *New York Post*. Kimmel then further pushed his policy point:

Yes, it is true that if you have an emergency, they will do an operation. And that's terrific if your baby's health problems are all solved during that one visit. The only problem is that never, ever happens. We've had a dozen doctor's appointments since

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Lee, MJ. “House Republicans pass bill to replace and repeal Obamacare.” *CNN*. 4 May 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/04/politics/health-care-vote/>

⁵⁰ Mahtani, Melissa. “Health care bill should pass 'Jimmy Kimmel test,' senator says.” *CNN*. 5 May 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/05/politics/senator-cassidy-health-bill-jimmy-kimmel-test-cnntv/index.html>

⁵¹ Yahr, Emily. “Jimmy Kimmel slams critics of his emotional health-care plea, calls out Newt Gingrich.” *Washington Post*. 9 May 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/05/09/jimmy-kimmel-slams-critics-of-his-emotional-health-care-plea-calls-out-newt-gingrich/?utm_term=.6240cef42682

our son had surgery. You've got a cardiologist, the pediatrician, surgeon; some kids need an ambulance to transport them. That doesn't even count the parents who have to miss work for all this stuff. Those details, Newt forgot to mention. I don't know if the double layers of Spanx are restricting the blood flow to his brain.⁵²

That same night, Senator Cassidy appeared on Kimmel's show for an interview. Kimmel attempted to define the 'Jimmy Kimmel test' as no one getting "denied healthcare, emergency or otherwise, because they can't afford it."⁵³ Cassidy disagreed slightly with Kimmel but avoided a strict definition of the test. He stated that the test meant that healthcare was affordable to middle-class families.⁵⁴

A month and a half later, on June 22nd, Senate Republicans released their copy of the health care bill.⁵⁵ A few days later, Kimmel tweeted, "Reminder for Sen @BillCassidy: Kimmel test is "No family should be denied medical care, emerg or otherwise, because they can't afford it."⁵⁶ Senator Cassidy responded on *CBS's* "Face The Nation" saying that he was undecided on the bill and that he would not back it unless his concerns were addressed.

In July, the Senate voted down four versions of the health care plan, with between three to nine Republicans voting no on the three Republican proposals. The dramatic failure

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Kliff, Sarah. "Jimmy Kimmel defines the 'Jimmy Kimmel test' on health care." *Vox*. 9 May 2017, <https://www.vox.com/health-care/2017/5/9/15591764/jimmy-kimmel-test-ahca>

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Savransky, Rebecca. "Jimmy Kimmel presses GOP senator to follow 'Kimmel test' on healthcare." *The Hill*. 25 Jun. 2017, <https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/339410-jimmy-kimmel-issues-reminder-to-bill-cassidy-to-follow-kimmel-test>

⁵⁶ Kimmel, Jimmy (@jimmykimmel). "Reminder for Sen @BillCassidy: Kimmel test is "No family should be denied medical care, emerg or otherwise, because they can't afford it." Twitter, 25 Jun. 2017, <https://twitter.com/jimmykimmel/status/879024924257595392>

of the votes led Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to declare that it was time to move on from the health care topic.⁵⁷

However, the victory for the ACA was temporary. In September, Senators Lindsey Graham and Bill Cassidy introduced another revised draft of the health care bill. This draft was specifically aimed to attract the Republican Senators who opposed the four versions in July.⁵⁸ September 19, 2017, a day after the Graham-Cassidy health care bill was introduced, Kimmel was back on his show to denounce the bill. Kimmel called Cassidy a liar, claiming that the bill did not live up to the ‘Jimmy Kimmel test.’ Kimmel then claimed that the test was defined as a health care plan that will “provide health coverage for everyone, prevent discrimination against people with preexisting conditions, lower premiums for middle-class Americans, and prohibit lifetime caps on insurance benefits.”⁵⁹

Over the next two nights, Kimmel continued to slam the health care bill, responding to attacks on his expertise with long lists of health care and patient groups that opposed the bill.⁶⁰ During this same time frame, *Public Policy Polling* conducted a poll on the bill’s approval rating. Table 1.1, on the next page, shows how many people approved of the Graham-Cassidy bill.

⁵⁷ Soffen, Kim, and Kevin Schaul. “Which health-care plans the Senate rejected (and who voted ‘no’).” *Washington Post*. 28 Jul. 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/politics/health-care-senate-amendment-votes/?utm_term=.99895cbc9c5e

⁵⁸ Soffen, Kim. “There’s one Obamacare repeal bill left standing. Here’s what’s in it.” *Washington Post*. 25 Sep. 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/politics/cassidy-graham-explainer/?utm_term=.60b78ce295c2

⁵⁹ Scott, Dylan. “Jimmy Kimmel: new Obamacare repeal bill flunks the Jimmy Kimmel Test.” *Vox*. 19 Sep. 2017, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/9/19/16337466/jimmy-kimmel-test-bill-cassidy-graham>

⁶⁰ Kliff, Sara. “Jimmy Kimmel vs. Cassidy, round 3: “If these guys would tell the truth ... I wouldn’t have to.”” *Vox*. 22 Sep. 2017, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/9/22/16349340/jimmy-kimmel-cassidy-obamacare>

Table 1.1: Nationwide Polling – September 20-21, 2017⁶¹

Right now the US Senate is considering another new health care plan known as the Graham-Cassidy bill, which would repeal the current health care law. Do you approve or disapprove of the Graham-Cassidy repeal and replace bill?	
Approve	24%
Disapprove.....	50%
Not sure	27%

This poll, conducted one week before the Senate vote on the bill shows that less than a quarter of the country supported the Graham-Cassidy bill. This poll also asked individuals if they agreed with Kimmel about the bill (Table 1.2).

Table 1.2: Nationwide Polling – September 20-21, 2017⁶²

Do you agree or disagree with Jimmy Kimmel, who says that no one should be denied lifesaving healthcare coverage for themselves or their families because they can't afford to pay?	
Agree	77%
Disagree	13%
Not sure	10%

This poll indicates that more than three-quarters of Americans agreed with Kimmel's stance on the healthcare issue.

In the week leading up to the healthcare vote, three Republican Senators defected from the party line and declared they would not vote in favor of the bill. The Senators were Sens. Rand Paul, John McCain, and Susan Collins. This defection sealed the fate of the bill, leading Majority Leader McConnell to move on from healthcare.⁶³ Because the Senate had a

⁶¹ "National Survey Results." *Public Policy Polling*. 21 Sep. 2017, <http://www.savemycare.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/NationalResults.pdf>

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Prokop, Andrew. "Republicans will not vote on Graham-Cassidy — admitting defeat on Obamacare repeal again." *Vox*. 26 Sep. 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/9/26/16368708/graham-cassidy-vote-canceled>

September 30 deadline to pass the legislation with only a majority vote, this meant that the possibility of passing a healthcare bill would be exponentially more difficult.

The healthcare bill versus Kimmel debacle of 2017 left Republicans in a difficult place for repealing the ACA. The battle actually left the ACA with a bump in popularity with only 32% of Americans saying it should be scrapped.⁶⁴

Table 1.3 shows that many Americans trusted Kimmel more than Republicans in Congress.

Table 1.3: Nationwide Polling – September 22-25, 2017⁶⁵

Who do you trust more when it comes to health care issues: Jimmy Kimmel, or the Republicans in Congress?	
<i>Jimmy Kimmel</i>	47%
<i>The Republicans in Congress</i>	34%
<i>Not sure</i>	19%

This poll shows that more Americans trusted a late-night comedian than their elected officials when it came to an important domestic policy issue.

Towards the end of the healthcare bill battle, *MSNBC* credited Kimmel with playing a significant role in defeating the bill. The broadcasters claimed that he brought the issue to the attention of the American public, preventing Republicans from being able to pass it quietly. They also claimed that he was able to explain the issue to the people in a way that made the issue personal and understandable.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ “2018 Shaping Up Big for Democrats.” *Public Policy Polling*. 28 Sep. 2017, https://www.publicpolicypolling.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/PPP_Release_National_92817-1.pdf

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ “How Jimmy Kimmel Impacts the Health Care Debate.” *MSNBC*, on NBC News, 22 Sep. 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/show-me/video/how-jimmy-kimmel-impacted-the-health-care-debate-1052829251835>

John Oliver vs. the FCC

On June 1, 2014, John Oliver used his show, *Last Week Tonight*, to focus on net neutrality. Due to a federal appeals court decision early in the year, net neutrality was at risk. Net neutrality rules are typically in place to prevent internet service providers from giving priority to certain sites by creating fast and slow lanes.⁶⁷ In the thirteen-minute segment, Oliver humorously explained that net neutrality needed to be protected and called out the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) attempt to dismantle it. At the end of his rant, Oliver went a step beyond Kimmel by giving his audience specific instructions to call out the FCC.⁶⁸ Oliver instructed his audience to go to the FCC website's comment page and leave an angry comment on the website regarding net neutrality.⁶⁹ By the next morning, the FCC's comment page had been disabled due to high traffic as over 45,000 new comments concerning net neutrality flooded their site.⁷⁰ According to the Pew Research Center, before the clip aired, the FCC had only received about 3,000 comments. The week after the clip aired, that number had reached almost 80,000 comments.⁷¹ The Center also monitored mainstream news media coverage of the net neutrality issue and concluded that coverage of the issue was scarce. Despite the lack of news coverage, the public comments on the FCC

⁶⁷ Risen, Tom. "FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler: 'I Am Not a Dingo'" *U.S. News & World Report*. 13 Jun. 2014, <https://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/washington-whispers/2014/06/13/fcc-chairman-tom-wheeler-i-am-not-a-dingo>

⁶⁸ McDonald, Soraya Nadia. "John Oliver's net neutrality rant may have caused FCC site crash." *Washington Post*. 4 Jun. 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/06/04/john-olivers-net-neutrality-rant-may-have-caused-fcc-site-crash/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.dc6388765956

⁶⁹ *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, season 1, episode 5, "Net Neutrality," directed by Joe Perota, aired 1 Jun. 2014, on HBO

⁷⁰ McDonald, Soraya Nadia. "John Oliver's net neutrality rant may have caused FCC site crash."

⁷¹ Williams, Alex T., and Martin Shelton. "What drove spike in public comments on net neutrality? Likely, a comedian." *Pew Research Center*. 5 Sep. 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/05/what-drove-spike-in-public-comments-on-net-neutrality-likely-a-comedian/>

page spiked twice, once after Oliver’s coverage and another time right before the comments were scheduled to close.⁷² Figure 1.1 highlights these spikes in comments.

Fig. 1.1: Net Neutrality Public Comment Spikes, 2014⁷³

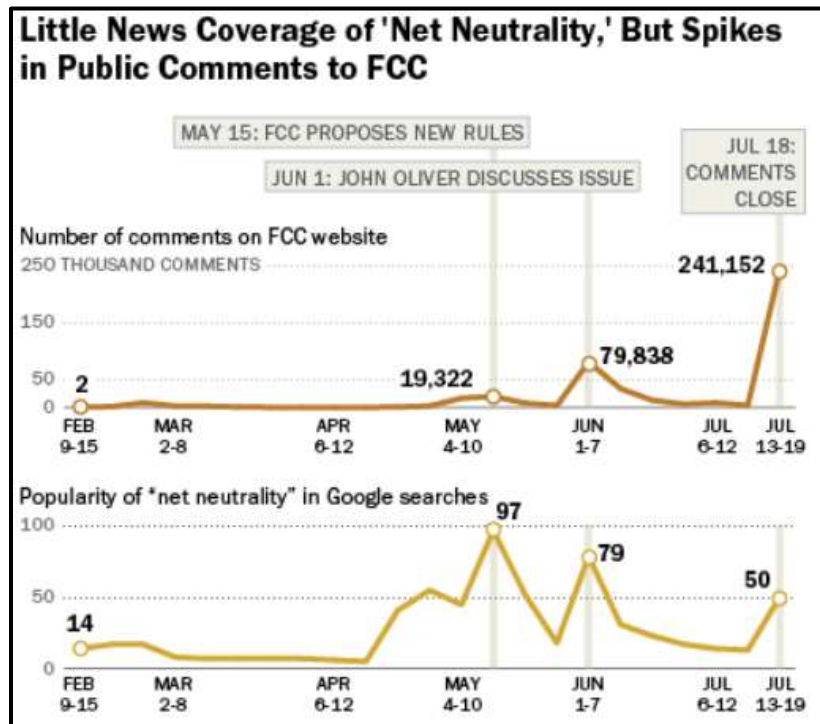


Figure 1.1 shows a significant spike after Oliver’s clip, but it also shows a far more substantial spike later on. The Pew Research Center speculated that this spike was likely due to grassroots campaigns. However, at least one of those grassroots campaigns embedded the Oliver clip on the front page of its web-based platforms. The graphic also shows a correlating spike in internet searches after the episode aired.⁷⁴

The net neutrality episode was also a success for Oliver’s show. *Last Week Tonight* was only on its fifth episode and was considered a risky formula for success. Unlike most late-night comedy shows that skimmed current events, the show was hinging on comedic

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

deep dives into obscure issues around supreme court cases and other lesser-known political issues, an angle that Oliver himself did not expect to take off in the way that it did.⁷⁵ When Oliver introduced net neutrality as his fifth deep dive topic, he introduced it, stating, “Oh my god, that is the most boring thing I’ve ever seen! That is even boring by C-Span standards... The cable companies have figured out the great truth of America: If you want to do something evil put it inside something boring.”⁷⁶ Oliver, however, was able to turn the lackluster topic into a viral video. Within 24 hours of posting the video on YouTube, it had been viewed over 800,000 times.⁷⁷ Released emails from the FCC show that even FCC leadership had a laugh at the clip.⁷⁸

Two days after the show aired, and a day after the FCC website issues, the National Cable Television Association, who opposed treating broadband internet as a utility, met and screened Oliver’s clip. One anonymous insider noted that they knew Oliver’s rant was going to be an issue for them.⁷⁹ A senior director at an advocacy group that was fighting for net neutrality later noted that Oliver gave them a moment to rally around.⁸⁰

A survey conducted by the University of Delaware Center for Political Communication showed that shows like Oliver’s were far more successful at educating their viewers on the issue of net neutrality. According to the survey, *Last Week Tonight* viewers were three times more likely to be well informed on the topic than the general public. The

⁷⁵ Carr, David. “John Oliver’s Complicated Fun Connects for HBO.” *New York Times*. 16 November 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/17/business/media/john-olivers-complicated-fun-connects-for-hbo.html>

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Holpuch, Amanda. “John Oliver’s cheeky net neutrality plea crashes FCC website.” *Guardian*. 3 Jun. 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jun/03/john-oliver-fcc-website-net-neutrality>

⁷⁸ Lecher, Colin. “Read the FCC’s internal emails about John Oliver’s net neutrality segment.” *Verge*. 13 Nov. 2014, <https://www.theverge.com/2014/11/13/7205817/fcc-john-oliver-net-neutrality-emails>

⁷⁹ Carr, David. “John Oliver’s Complicated Fun Connects for HBO.”

⁸⁰ “How John Oliver transformed Net neutrality debate.” *Bloomberg News*. 25 Feb. 2015, <https://www.crainsnewyork.com/article/20150226/ENTERTAINMENT/150229893/how-john-oliver-transformed-net-neutrality-debate>

survey also revealed that viewers of satirical shows like Oliver's were more likely to be informed on the issue than traditional news outlets. This is highlighted in figure 1.2.⁸¹

Fig. 1.2: Viewership Familiarity with Net Neutrality, 2014⁸²

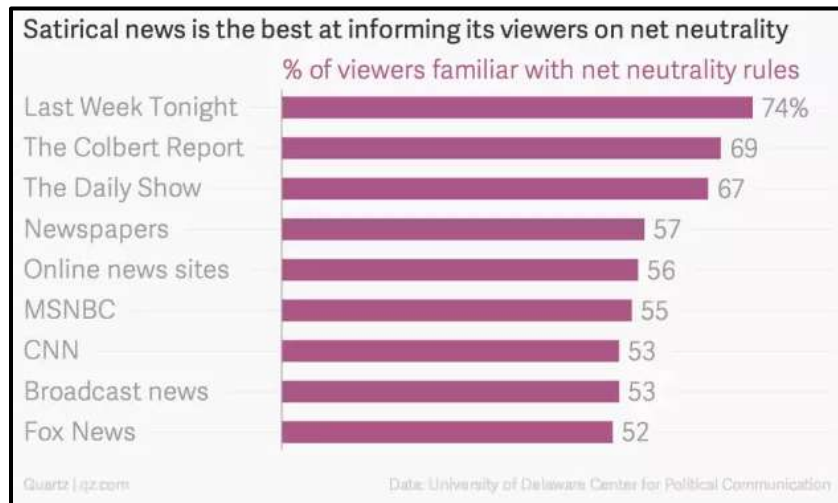


Figure 1.2 shows that almost three out of four *Last Week Tonight* viewers were familiar with the issue of net neutrality while only just over half of traditional news viewers familiar with the issue.

With a large amount of public attention on the topic, in November 2014, even President Obama stepped forward to call for strong net neutrality laws.⁸³ Finally, in late February 2015, the FCC voted 3-2 to treat broadband internet as a public utility, satisfying net neutrality activists.⁸⁴ After the vote, advocates for net neutrality, including Aram Sinnreich, a professor at Rutgers University's School of Communication and Information in

⁸¹ Epstein, Adam. "Fox News viewers are the least informed about net neutrality." *Quartz*. 12 Nov. 2014, <https://qz.com/295530/fox-news-viewers-are-the-least-informed-about-net-neutrality/>

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ruiz, Rebecca R., and Steve Lohr. "F.C.C. Approves Net Neutrality Rules, Classifying Broadband Internet Service as a Utility." *New York Times*. 26 Feb. 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/27/technology/net-neutrality-fcc-vote-internet-utility.html>

⁸⁴ Ibid.

New Brunswick, N.J., came forward to thank Oliver, claiming that he helped turn the tide in the debate.⁸⁵

Analysis and Discussion

The data collected reveals six noteworthy results. The first four results align with Baum and Jamison's research on the four Oprah effects: the late-night hosts were able to grab the attention of the viewers, educate the viewers on the issues, influence their viewers' attitudes on the issues, and in one of the cases, clearly influence viewers to act. The fifth result shows how the hosts affected the policy and the final result highlights that the quality of information delivered by the two hosts.

Attention

MSNBC noted that Kimmel's multiple monologues about the healthcare bill brought attention to the bill.⁸⁶ Kimmel's viewership in 2017 actually rose due to his monologues on healthcare.⁸⁷ Moreover, despite the liberal lean of his monologues, Kimmel remained in the top two late-night comedy shows for Republicans that year.⁸⁸

Similarly, Oliver's net neutrality rant garnered a significant amount of attention. When the clip was posted on YouTube, it gained almost a million views in 24 hours.⁸⁹ The

⁸⁵ Bruinius, Harry. "Net neutrality's stunning reversal of fortune: Is it John Oliver's doing?" *Christian Science Monitor*. 26 Feb. 2015, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2015/0226/Net-neutrality-s-stunning-reversal-of-fortune-Is-it-John-Oliver-s-doing>

⁸⁶ "How Jimmy Kimmel Impacts the Health Care Debate." *MSNBC*. 22 Sep. 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkRJtV5u7Lw>

⁸⁷ O'Connell, Michael. "TV Ratings: Kimmel's Health Care Coverage Heats Up Late-Night Race." *Hollywood Reporter*. 26 Sep. 2017, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/tv-ratings-kimmels-health-care-coverage-heats-up-late-night-race-1043199>

⁸⁸ Berg, Madeline. "Politics After Dark: Where Cable News Viewers Go for Late-Night TV." *Forbes*. 24 Oct. 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/maddieberg/2017/10/24/politics-after-dark-where-cable-news-viewers-go-for-late-night-tv/#448398611feb>

⁸⁹ Holpuch, Amanda. "John Oliver's cheeky net neutrality plea crashes FCC website."

clip also appeared to have spurred an interest in the issue online as searches on “net neutrality” spiked shortly after the clip aired.⁹⁰

Through the garnered attention, the two comedians engaged in agenda-setting by bringing the issues forward as issues of public concern.

Education

As Kimmel’s ratings grew, he did not shy away from the details of the bill. In one of his more viewed rants, he put the logos of the groups that were opposed to the bill on the screen, and he went on to explain the details. Months later, Sen. Cassidy pointed out that Kimmel was provided with talking points by the Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, which was confirmed by Sen. Schumer’s office.⁹¹

Oliver’s explanation of net neutrality was immensely educational on the topic. Net neutrality was a notoriously boring and complex topic, but Oliver managed to make it funny and entertaining. *Last Week Tonight* viewers were three times more likely to be well informed on the topic than the general public.⁹²

Like in Parkin’s research on the priming effect of soft news, the two comedians were able to use their platforms to educate viewers in a passive way.⁹³

Attitude and Action

There is little evidence that Kimmel’s healthcare plea led to an increase in calls or letters to Congress. This could be due to a lack of tracking or it could be that Kimmel did not

⁹⁰ Williams, Alex T., and Martin Shelton. “What drove spike in public comments on net neutrality? Likely, a comedian.”

⁹¹ Bowden, John. “Sen. Cassidy says he won’t go back on Kimmel after health care fight.” *The Hill*. Feb. 2018, <https://thehill.com/blogs/in-the-know/in-the-know/371971-cassidy-wont-go-back-on-jimmy-kimmels-show-after-healthcare>

⁹² Epstein, Adam. “Fox News viewers are the least informed about net neutrality.”

⁹³ Parkin, Michael. “Taking Late Night Comedy Seriously: How Candidate Appearances on Late Night Television Can Engage Viewers.”

sway the public to action. However, Kimmel was able to influence the attitudes of his viewers. Similar to Schudson's research on Reagan, Kimmel was able to sway public opinion and gain trust, which may have swayed members of Congress into action.⁹⁴ Ultimately, Kimmel may have influenced Congress into inaction by highlighting the issue and preventing Republicans from making another full-fledged attack against the ACA.

In contrast, Oliver's plea for net neutrality inspired far more observable attitude changes and actions. He was able to spark interest in a topic that most people found boring, even inducing a chuckle amongst FCC leadership.⁹⁵ Oliver provided his viewers with the FCC comment page and gave clear direction on what they could do to fight back. Within hours, the FCC site was overwhelmed and proponents of ending net neutrality were worried.⁹⁶

These two different results on attitude and action align with Peterson's argument that more traditional late-night comedy shows inspire more cynicism while polemic comedy shows behave more like advocacy.⁹⁷

Effect

While crediting the two hosts with saving the two issues would be extreme and would discount the hard work of grassroots efforts and advocacy groups, this research shows that they had a significant impact on the two issues.

Kimmel's plea for the ACA helped give the issue a spotlight and possibly even prevented Republicans from passing a repeal without scrutiny from the general public.

⁹⁴ Schudson, Michael. *The Power of News*; "2018 Shaping Up Big for Democrats."

⁹⁵ Lecher, Colin. "Read the FCC's internal emails about John Oliver's net neutrality segment."

⁹⁶ Williams, Alex T., and Martin Shelton. "What drove spike in public comments on net neutrality? Likely, a comedian."; Carr, David. "John Oliver's Complicated Fun Connects for HBO."

⁹⁷ Peterson, Russell L., *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke*, 203-207.

Republicans resorted to covertly gutting portions of the bill in the tax bill they passed later that year, but were unwilling to fight for a total repeal.⁹⁸

Oliver's ability to explain the complex issue of net neutrality may have helped to turn the tide of the debate in favor of protecting it.⁹⁹ Interestingly, Oliver's approach not only had an effect on the policy itself but on future, unrelated policies at all levels. Shortly before the FCC announced its decision on the issue, Washington State Senator Cyrus Habib credited Oliver's show as inspiration for a new bill that would allow citizens to submit videos online to comment on new legislation. The state senator explained that Oliver's approach helped make boring topics, like net neutrality, more interesting and could potentially increase local government transparency.¹⁰⁰

Fact-Checking

While the hosts were able to influence policy and inspire the electorate to understand complex issues, it is important to note that they are not held up to the same journalistic integrity as their hard news counterparts. Kimmel demonstrated this point when he directly misquoted Sen. Cassidy when it came to the 'Jimmy Kimmel test.'¹⁰¹ The fact-checking site, *PolitiFact*, also noted that some of Kimmel's claims were unverifiable.¹⁰²

Oliver's show, on the other hand, prioritizes fact-checking. Oliver claimed that he holds his staff to high standards when it comes to putting the truth on air. However, he was

⁹⁸ Kenen, Joanne. "The stealth repeal of Obamacare." *Politico*. 19 Dec. 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/12/19/obamacare-repeal-tax-bill-trump-243912>

⁹⁹ Bruinius, Harry. "Net neutrality's stunning reversal of fortune: Is it John Oliver's doing?" *Christian Science Monitor*. 26 Feb. 2015, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2015/0226/Net-neutrality-s-stunning-reversal-of-fortune-Is-it-John-Oliver-s-doing>

¹⁰⁰ Luckerson, Victor. "How the 'John Oliver Effect' Is Having a Real-Life Impact." *Time*. 20 Jan. 2015, updated 10 Jul. 2015, <https://time.com/3674807/john-oliver-net-neutrality-civil-forfeiture-miss-america/>

¹⁰¹ Bowden, John. "Sen. Cassidy says he won't go back on Kimmel after health care fight."

¹⁰² Greenberg, Jon. "Fact-checking Jimmy Kimmel's reaction to the Graham-Cassidy bill." *PolitiFact*. 20 Sep. 2017, <https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2017/sep/20/fact-checking-jimmy-kimmels-reaction-graham-cassidy/>

also clear to note that his show is just comedy and that the intense fact-checking that his team does is in pursuit of a joke, not in the pursuit of journalism.¹⁰³

Conclusion

Moving into 2020, soft news continues to serve as a platform for politicians, from President Trump on “Fox and Friends” to Democratic primary candidates on late-night comedy shows.¹⁰⁴ However, this paper took the focus off of the politicians, and turned it to the hosts. This section upholds the research conducted by Baum and Jamison and shows that late-night hosts can be more than comedians. Through their attention-grabbing comedy and educational pieces, these hosts can act as policy advocates, inspiring viewers to push for and achieve change.

This research was limited due to the lack of data surrounding grassroots advocacy uses of the two clips and a lack of data concerning letters and calls made to Senators after Kimmel’s plea. Future research could be done on events as they unfold in order to better track this data. Research could also be done to assess the frequency of misinformation in late-night comedy and measure the potential impact on policies. As the 2020 election cycle unfolds, future research could also focus on the frequency that politicians appear on soft news as well as the types of soft news used by political parties.

It is important to note that these shows are primarily meant for entertainment and profit.¹⁰⁵ While some hosts, like Oliver, put rigorous effort into fact-checking, there is no

¹⁰³ “Is John Oliver's Show Journalism? He Says The Answer Is Simple: 'No'.” *All Things Considered*, on NPR, 12 Feb. 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/02/12/466569047/is-john-olivers-show-journalism-he-says-the-answer-is-simple-no>; Carr, David. “John Oliver’s Complicated Fun Connects for HBO.”

¹⁰⁴ Loiaconi, Stephen. “2020 Candidates Look to Late-night to Stand Out in a Crowded Democratic Field.” *ABC*, 15 Jan. 2019, <https://abc6onyourside.com/news/nation-world/2020-candidates-look-to-late-night-to-stand-out-in-a-crowded-democratic-field>; Weiss, Joanna. “The Strange Psychological Power of ‘Fox and Friends.’” *Politico*, Jun. 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/04/28/fox-friends-news-psychology-appeal-conservative-media-215044>

¹⁰⁵ Bennett, Lance W. *News: The Politics of Illusion*, 21.

requirement for them to do so. Moreover, when they are caught crossing the line into disinformation, these hosts have the ability to dodge criticism by claiming they are “just entertainers.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Peterson, Russell L., *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke*, 89.

Propaganda: Memeing Politics

Introduction

The ‘Internet Meme’ is quickly gaining influence in American political culture. While internet memes have likely existed since the early internet days, it was only over the last two decades that they took aim at politics. The Washington Post called Election 2016 “the most memed election in U.S. history.” However, it was only four years earlier that we experienced the “First meme election.”¹⁰⁷

During the 2012 presidential debates, political gaffes and odd statements were swiftly turned into memes and shared widely across the internet.¹⁰⁸ The result was humorous, but while the United States was laughing at the new trend, countries like Russia and China were taking note. During the 2016 election cycle, Russia weaponized the meme, turning it into a tool to divide Americans.¹⁰⁹ China, on the other hand, took the opposite route, by attempting to control and censor memes.¹¹⁰

Since 2012, individuals and governments alike have begun to use memes in order to participate and potentially influence U.S. elections. The dramatic increase in meme usage over the last decade suggests that this trend will likely increase in importance over the next few election cycles. This chapter asks, how have individuals and governments used political

¹⁰⁷ Dewey, Caitlin. “How Bernie Sanders became the lord of ‘dank memes’.” *Washington Post*. 23 Feb. 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/02/23/how-bernie-sanders-became-the-lord-of-dank-memes/>; Jeffries, Adrienne. “In 2012 election, the meme factory hones its assembly line.” *Verge*. 24 Oct. 2012, <https://www.theverge.com/2012/10/24/3541836/2012-presidential-election-memes>

¹⁰⁸ Jeffries, Adrienne. “In 2012 election, the meme factory hones its assembly line.” *Verge*. 24 Oct. 2012, <https://www.theverge.com/2012/10/24/3541836/2012-presidential-election-memes>

¹⁰⁹ Lapowsky, Issie. “How Russian Trolls Used Meme Warfare to Divide America.” *Wired*. 17 Dec. 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/russia-ira-propaganda-senate-report/>

¹¹⁰ Mina, An Xiao. *Memes to Movements*. (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2019), 112.

internet memes to unite and influence political bases and what does that mean for future U.S. election cycles? Individuals and governments use memes as a form of political participation and to recruit and unite political bases to an ideology.

This chapter will attempt to describe how these actors use political internet memes through the analysis of three movements. First, this chapter will begin with a review of significant research surrounding memes. It will then move on to an analysis of meme usage during the Occupy Wall Street movement. Next, it will analyze how the alt-right movement has used memes since its inception. Then, it will analyze how Russia used memes during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Finally, it will analyze the results from this research.

Previous Research

Defining Political Internet Memes

The meaning of the word ‘meme’ can vary widely in usage and therefore must be defined in the context of this chapter. Before the internet was in widespread use, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the word ‘meme’ and defined it as a “unit of cultural transmission” or a spreadable idea like a common joke, song, or style.¹¹¹ For this section, the definition is narrowed to a political internet meme. Hebrew University of Jerusalem communication and journalism professor, Limor Shifman defined an internet meme as:

A group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.¹¹²

This definition is narrowed even further in this section by the caveat that the internet meme must have a political nexus, either concerning a political character, party, or idea. Shifman

¹¹¹ Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*, 40th anniversary ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 249.

¹¹² Shifman, Limor. *Memes in Digital Culture*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014), 41.

also noted that political memes typically deal with persuasion, action, and discussion.¹¹³

Figure 2.1 is an example of a political internet meme from the 2012 election cycle.

Figure 2.1: “Binders Full of Women” Meme¹¹⁴



Figure 2.1 is an example of the “Binders Full of Women” meme. It refers to the 2012 presidential candidate, Mitt Romney, and a comment he made about women during a debate. When asked about pay disparity, Romney explained that when he asked his aides to see more female candidates, they brought him “whole binders full of women.”¹¹⁵ This line was combined with a scene from the movie *Dirty Dancing* when Patrick Swayze’s character says “Nobody puts Baby in the corner.”¹¹⁶

There is also an important distinction between memes, political cartoons, and virals. First, while political memes and political cartoons both serve a satirical purpose, political cartoons are static but memes are mixable, taking on many different forms and interpretations.¹¹⁷ Also, for a meme to be widely successful, it needs to “go viral”, or spread

¹¹³ Ibid., 136.

¹¹⁴ @HeyVeronica. “No One Puts Baby in a Binder.” 2012, <http://bindersfullofwomen.tumblr.com>

¹¹⁵ Dailey, Kate. “Big Bird and binders: Election memes explained.” *BBC*. 18 Oct. 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-19973271>

¹¹⁶ *Dirty Dancing*, directed by Emile Ardolino, featuring Patrick Swayze, Jennifer Grey, and Jerry Orbach (Vestron Pictures, 1987).

¹¹⁷ Miranda, Carolina A. “From Clinton’s shimmy to Pepe the frog: Memes and the LOLcat effect on the 2016 election.” *Los Angeles Times*. 20 Oct. 2016, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-ca-cam-memes-political-art-election-20161005-snap-htmlstory.html>

far and wide through the internet, but not all viral images, or virals, are memes. Virals are internet images or videos that spread far and wide through the internet, but like political cartoons, they keep their original form and meaning.¹¹⁸

Shifman argued that for a meme to have viral success, it must contain certain types of content. She argued that people are more likely to share content that is positive or humorous, provokes strong emotions, delivers the message clearly and simply, and encourages participation.¹¹⁹ The emotional and humorous nature of memes is important because of the impact that these types of entertainment can have on political decision making.

Political Knowledge and Entertainment

Researchers Shanto Iyengar, Matthew Baum, and Charles Taber, referenced in chapter one, noted that Americans tend to shape their political opinions heuristically, meaning that they base more of their political opinions off of feeling rather than from facts.¹²⁰ Taber explained that Americans construct their political attitudes off of the ‘context of the moment’ rather than ‘crystallized’ attitudes from facts.¹²¹ Baum also noted that individuals can be affected by entertainment media through an *Incidental By-product* model, when political information “piggybacks” onto more entertaining topics, especially when the individual is politically uninterested.¹²²

Brief History of Political Internet Memes

The 2008 elections brought about a new form of political participation. Multiple researchers noted that prior to this campaign cycle, political participation was measured in

¹¹⁸ Shifman, Limor. *Memes in Digital Culture*, 59.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66-72.

¹²⁰ Iyengar, Shanto. *Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide*, 240; Baum, Matthew A., and Angela S. Jamison. “Soft News and the Four Oprah Effects.” 126.

¹²¹ Taber, Charles S. “Political Cognition and Public Opinion.” In *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media*, 369.

¹²² Baum, Matthew A., and Angela S. Jamison. “Soft News and the Four Oprah Effects.” 123-124.

activities like voting or joining political organizations by political scientists.¹²³ In 2008, that definition widened as then-Senator Barrack Obama changed the face of political communication through his use of the internet, eventually gaining the nickname, “first social-media president.”¹²⁴ For the first time, more than half of voting-age adults learned about and participated in the election online.¹²⁵ In 2008, Obama used the internet to expand his political brand, fundraise, and create a sense of engagement, allowing people to participate in his campaign in new ways.¹²⁶ At this point, early signs of political memes were creeping in. Numerous virals were shared, like the “Yes We Can” video and Obama’s “Hope” poster. The “Hope” poster also became a meme as it was replicated and altered for humorous and derogatory content. The Republican ticket was hit as well as Governor Sarah Palin’s gaffes became the subject of early political memes.¹²⁷

Over the next four years, online political activity evolved. By the time the 2012 election cycle came around, online memes were immensely popular and a combination of memes and campaigns seemed inevitable. Election 2012 was dubbed the “First Meme Election” as political internet memes circulated the internet, highlighting political gaffes and other exploitable moments.¹²⁸ Some journalists during this time argued that memes did more

¹²³ Shifman, Limor. *Memes in Digital Culture*, 120; Neuman, W. Russell, Bruce Bimber, and Matthew Hindman. “The Internet and Four Dimensions of Citizenship.” In *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media*, edited by Robert Y. Shapiro and Lawrence R. Jacobs. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 32.

¹²⁴ Bogost, Ian. “Obama Was Too Good at Social Media.” *Atlantic*. 6 Jan. 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/01/did-america-need-a-social-media-president/512405/>

¹²⁵ Smith, Aaron. “The Internet’s Role in Campaign 2008.” *Pew Research Center*. 15 Apr. 2009, <https://www.pewinternet.org/2009/04/15/the-internets-role-in-campaign-2008/>

¹²⁶ Carr, David. “How Obama Tapped Into Social Network’s Power.” *New York Times*. 9 Nov. 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/10/business/media/10carr.html?login=email&auth=login-email>

¹²⁷ Jeffries, Adrienne. “In 2012 election, the meme factory hones its assembly line.” *The Verge*. 24 Oct. 2012, <https://www.theverge.com/2012/10/24/3541836/2012-presidential-election-memes>

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

to define candidates and their brands than anything else.¹²⁹ Campaigns attempted to regain control of the narrative or redirect negative memes, but were often unable to capture the same caliber of attention that meme generators did.¹³⁰

The campaigns of 2008 and 2012 gave us the “first social media president” and the “first meme election”, but in 2016, the internet owned the election, with journalists calling it the “first Internet Election.”¹³¹ Instead of providing people with information and understanding, the internet reached a point of ‘informational fog’ where good and bad information co-existed, hindering our ability to recognize the truth.¹³² By 2016, the candidates were well versed in memes. Some memes even reached such a level of prominence that candidates felt the need to respond. After numerous memes mocked former Secretary Hillary Clinton for pandering, she attempted to join in on the joke, asking “Is it working?” when referring to the pandering.¹³³ As the election neared, Clinton’s campaign even published an explainer about a specific alt-right meme that is discussed later in this chapter.¹³⁴ Days later, the Anti-Defamation League added this meme to its list of hate symbols.¹³⁵

¹²⁹ Ibid.; Neuman, Scott. “Political Memes: Fast, Cheap and Out of Control?” *NPR*. 24 Oct. 2012, <https://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2012/10/24/163552936/political-memes-fast-cheap-and-out-of-control>

¹³⁰ Neuman, Scott. “Political Memes: Fast, Cheap and Out of Control?”

¹³¹ Keen, Andrew. “How the Internet is Threatening Our Freedom.” *Politico*. 18 May 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/05/2016-election-internet-campaign-facts-digital-new-media-213899>

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Paul, Kari. “How Memes Shaped the 2016 Presidential Election.” *Complex*. 12 May 2016, <https://www.complex.com/life/2016/05/election-memes>

¹³⁴ Singal, Jesse. “How Internet Trolls Won the 2016 Presidential Election.” *Intelligencer*. 16 Sep. 2016. <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2016/09/how-internet-trolls-won-the-2016-presidential-election.html>

¹³⁵ Chmielewski, Dawn. “Internet memes emerge as 2016 election’s political dog whistle.” *USA Today*. 30 Sep. 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2016/09/30/internet-memes-white-house-election-president/91272490/>

The memes of 2016 were predominantly generated anonymously on anonymous message board sites like Reddit, 4Chan, and 8Chan. These sites operated like testing grounds for memes. When a meme was voted to the top, or “upvoted”, it got disseminated onto sites like Facebook and Twitter for wider recirculation.¹³⁶ In past elections, campaigns came up with their own slogans and disseminated them to the people. In 2016, through the meme pipeline, the people created the slogans. UCLA political science professor Lynn Vavreck explained, “Presidential campaigns have always been engaged in trying to find these persuasive, short, compelling tools. It’s as if we let everybody make a button for Richard Nixon in 1960 and go to a flea market and the guy who sells the most button wins.”¹³⁷

The last decade has led to a significant rise in political memes, and as the 2020 election cycle unfolds, memes will likely play an even more substantial role as campaigns, especially the incumbent’s, attempt to harness their power.¹³⁸

Participatory Media Culture and Memes

As previously mentioned, the definition of political participation recently grew. This growth included minor activities like social media posts, and sharing political memes. In the past, young adults had low participation rates in politics. However, these new forms of participation have inspired them and produced an influx of young participation.¹³⁹

Shifman argued that memes increase participation because they satisfy three main functions. First, they act as a form of persuasion. She noted that people tend to prefer content created by average citizens over campaigns. During the 2008 cycle, party-sponsored ads

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Flynn, Kerry. “The 2020 meme election: How memes became a mainstream tool in politics.” *Digiday*. 5 Jun. 2019, <https://digiday.com/marketing/meme-election-memes-became-mainstream-tool-politics/>

¹³⁹ Shifman, Limor. *Memes in Digital Culture*, 120.

averaged less than 60,000 views, while ads created by average citizens averaged over 800,000 views.¹⁴⁰ This suggests that when average citizens create memes, they can have more of an effect than when campaigns create ads.

Second, memes are a form of grassroots action. The internet has allowed for individuals to organize without a formal organization's influence through 'connective action.'¹⁴¹ Through their research of the 2016 election cycle, Baylor University communications professor, Mia Moody-Ramirez, and journalism scholar, Andrew B. Church, found that social media and memes allow for individuals to eschew traditional information gatekeepers and give their own interpretations of issues.¹⁴² Memes, in this sense, serve Dawkins's original definition, acting as a "unit of cultural transmission" by spreading slogans and ideas across the internet.¹⁴³

Finally, memes act as modes of political expression. By creating and sharing memes, people are involving themselves in a movement while also displaying their individualism through what Shifman called 'networked individualism.'¹⁴⁴ College of Charleston communication professor Ryan Milner added to this by claiming that individuals can use memes to connect, converse, argue, and antagonize. He calls this phenomenon, 'polyvocal public participation.'¹⁴⁵ Milner argued that conversing and antagonizing is essential to public conversation and that memes provide an avenue for this type of discourse.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., *Culture*, 125.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 128.

¹⁴² Moody-Ramirez, Mia, and Andrew B. Church. "Analysis of Facebook Meme Groups Used During the 2016 US Presidential Election." *Social Media + Society*. 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118808799>

¹⁴³ Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*, 249.

¹⁴⁴ Shifman, Limor. *Memes in Digital Culture*, 34.

¹⁴⁵ Milner, Ryan M. *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016), 111.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 118.

While memes do not have the same impact as a vote, they can act to draw previously uninterested individuals into the conversation. This section will focus on how individuals and governments attempt to harness that power for their own movements.

Methodology

This chapter will focus on the main actors of meme campaigns and attempt to discern patterns in their usages. In order to study these patterns, this chapter will look into three meme cases, looking at their main actors and significant events. It will first look at the Occupy movement, as it was one of the first intentional meme campaigns. Second, it will look into the alt-right and its campaign to elect Donald Trump and recruit new members. Finally, it will look into Russia's meme campaign to sow doubt into the U.S. democratic process. News articles, interviews, think tank research, and Congressional research was used to collect this information.

Data

Occupy

The main meme actors in the Occupy movement were the creator, Kalle Lasn; Anonymous; the Occupy protestors; and the online detractors.

In the summer of 2011, advertising expert and political activist, Kalle Lasn, decided to capitalize on global economic strife and uprisings by igniting a movement of his own. Lasn's advertising background led him to believe in the power of imagery. His goal was to take that tool and give it to the people as a weapon against traditional power structures.¹⁴⁷ In July of 2011, Lasn published the first Occupy Wall Street (OWS) advertisement on a blog

¹⁴⁷ Yardley, William. "The Branding of the Occupy Movement." *New York Times*. 27 Nov. 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/28/business/media/the-branding-of-the-occupy-movement.html>

with the hashtag #OccupyWallStreet and called for protests in September of that year.¹⁴⁸ The advertisement contained a striking image of a ballerina posing atop the Charging Bull statue on Wall Street. Through this image, Lasn ignited one of the first intentional ‘meme wars’ where memes were used as an integral part of the movement.¹⁴⁹

Figure 2.2: First Occupy Wall Street Advertisement¹⁵⁰



¹⁴⁸ Berkowitz, Ben. “From a Single Hashtag, a Protest Circled the World.” *Reuters*, 17 Oct. 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-wallstreet-protests-social/from-a-single-hashtag-a-protest-circled-the-world-idUSTRE79G6E420111018>

¹⁴⁹ Shifman, Limor. *Memes in Digital Culture*, 130.

¹⁵⁰ Bierut, Michael. “The Poster that Launched a Movement (Or Not).” *Design Observer*, 30 Apr. 2012, <https://designobserver.com/feature/the-poster-that-launched-a-movement-or-not/32588>

More than a year before Lasn posted his first Occupy Wall Street ad, the online hacktivist group, Anonymous, was supporting a separate, but similar protest about the “the 99 percent.” This protest argued that the top one percent was setting the bottom 99 percent against each other to “fight over the crumbs.”¹⁵¹ Shortly before the first OWS protest in September 2011, Anonymous aligned its protest with Lasn’s and asked for people to share complaints about their economic situation as a 99 percenter.¹⁵² The “99 Percent” meme, as shown in Figure 2.3 was the result of this call for complaints.¹⁵³

Figure 2.3: “We are the 99 Percent” Meme¹⁵⁴



Figure 2.3 shows two examples from the “We are the 99 Percent” meme that the OWS movement used to oppose the richest one percent of Americans.¹⁵⁵ It consisted of people from various backgrounds sharing their economic hardships through a written statement and photo.

¹⁵¹ Greene, Brian. “How ‘Occupy Wall Street’ Started and Spread.” *U.S. News*. 17 Oct. 2011, <https://www.usnews.com/news/washington-whispers/articles/2011/10/17/how-occupy-wall-street-started-and-spread>; Captain, Sean. “The Real Role Of Anonymous In Occupy Wall Street.” *Fast Company*. 18 Oct. 2011, <https://www.fastcompany.com/1788397/real-role-anonymous-occupy-wall-street>

¹⁵² Captain, Sean. “The Real Role Of Anonymous In Occupy Wall Street.”

¹⁵³ “We are the 99 Percent.” *Know Your Meme*. Accessed 28 Sep. 2019, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/we-are-the-99-percent>

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

The first OWS protest was small and therefore largely ignored by traditional media outlets. However, in social media environments like Reddit, Tumblr, Twitter, and YouTube, individuals were actively participating and sharing memes and information about the protest.¹⁵⁶ Social media provided a landscape for people to learn about, engage in, and discuss the movement, even without the traditional media coverage.

In the first few days, the OWS movement exploded into a worldwide, “Occupy X” movement that reached 82 countries.¹⁵⁷ The protest itself acted like a meme as it was transformed, remixed, and personalized for each city. As the protests grew and expanded to new cities, so did the media coverage and online memeing. OWS memes consisted of personal stories and popular culture references. These memes made the issue of OWS more accessible to more people.¹⁵⁸ The 99% meme referenced earlier, however, was quickly satirized and used by opponents of the movement in the 53% meme. This meme referred to a tax statistic in 2009 that claimed that 47 percent of Americans did not pay federal income tax. The meme was used by the movement’s detractors to complain about the Occupy movement, claiming that their taxes were paying for protesters to not work.¹⁵⁹

Eventually, the Occupy movement fizzled and died, but many of the ideas live on within the political left. Both the movement and the “99 percent” mantra are credited with the resurgence of the Democratic Socialists of America.¹⁶⁰ A colleague of Lasn, Micah White, argued that the movement was able to change the discourse, but did nothing to change the

¹⁵⁶ Milner, Ryan M., *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, p. 151.

¹⁵⁷ “Occupy Wall Street.” *Know Your Meme*. Accessed 28 Sep. 2019, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/occupy-wall-street>

¹⁵⁸ Milner, Ryan M., *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, p. 160.

¹⁵⁹ “We are the 99 Percent.”

¹⁶⁰ Stewart, Emily. “We are (still) the 99 percent.” *Vox*. 30 Apr. 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/4/23/18284303/occupy-wall-street-bernie-sanders-dsa-socialism>

power structure. White argued that the next step was to get people into positions of power through elections.¹⁶¹

Alt-Right

The main actors in the Alt-Right meme campaign are the founder, Richard Spencer, alt-right followers, the Trump campaign, and the Clinton campaign.

In 2008, Richard Spencer, the head of a white nationalist think tank, coined the term “Alternative Right” (alt-right) to describe his views on white nationalism and far-right agenda.¹⁶² Through blogs and journals, Spencer amassed a following of like-minded individuals behind his alt-right ideology. While other bloggers and journalists joined his cause, most of his followers came from social media sites like Twitter, Reddit, 8Chan, 4Chan, and Gab.¹⁶³ These sites, especially 4Chan, and Gab, are known for their extremely permissive environments that let hate speech thrive.¹⁶⁴ Alt-right followers used memes in these spaces to share their counter-culture narrative and separate themselves from the “normies,” or average, non-fringe people.¹⁶⁵

Through these sites, alt-right followers became particularly active in creating memes, testing them, and then dispersing them throughout the wider internet. A group of researchers out of Cornell University analyzed over 2.6 billion posts from these sites to analyze how fringe groups like the alt-right spread their memes. Their research showed a complex

¹⁶¹ Westervelt, Eric. “Occupy Activist Micah White: Time To Move Beyond Memes And Street Spectacles.” *NPR*. 28 Mar. 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/03/28/520911740/occupy-activist-micah-white-time-to-move-beyond-memes-and-street-spectacles>

¹⁶² “Alt-Right.” *Southern Poverty Law Center*. Accessed 29 Sep. 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alt-right>

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Zannettou, Savvas, et al., “On the Origins of Memes by Means of Fringe Web Communities,” (paper, Proceedings of the Internet Measurement Conference 2018, New York, NY, 31 Oct. 2018). <https://arxiv.org/abs/1805.12512>

¹⁶⁵ Khan, Rumi. “The Alt-Right as Counterculture: Memes, Video Games and Violence.” *Harvard Political Review*. 6 Jul. 2019, <https://harvardpolitics.com/culture/alt-right-counterculture/>

network of meme testing and dissemination. Politically motivated, alt-right memes are typically created on sites like 4Chan and Gab, where the most devout, fringe followers operate. The successful memes from these sites are shared onto sub-Reddit boards, where they are tested amongst more general followers. Finally, the successful memes from this process are shared on Twitter.¹⁶⁶ This level of sophistication in the meme process shows that alt-right followers are intentionally producing, testing, and using memes.

During the 2016 election cycle, alt-right adherents weaponized the use of memes to attract followers and troll Trump's detractors, calling it the "Great Meme War." Their memes acted as veiled invitations to alt-right ideology through humor and trolling.¹⁶⁷ A large bulk of their memes centered around an innocent comic strip character called "Pepe the Frog" as seen in Figure 2.4.¹⁶⁸

Figure 2.4: "Pepe the Frog" Meme¹⁶⁹



The cartoon frog in Figure 2.4 was taken from the comic series *Boy's Club* by Matt Furie.¹⁷⁰

Pepe was a blank slate. He represented whatever people wanted him to represent. His image

¹⁶⁶ Zannettou, Savvas, et. al. "On the Origins of Memes by Means of Fringe Web Communities."

¹⁶⁷ Greene, Viveca S. "'Deplorable' Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies." *Studies in American Humor*, vol. 5 no. 1, (2019), 36.

¹⁶⁸ Schreckinger, Ben. "World War Meme." *Politico*. Apr. 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/03/memes-4chan-trump-supporters-trolls-internet-214856>

¹⁶⁹ "Pepe the Frog." *Know Your Meme*. Accessed 1 Oct. 2019, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pepe-the-frog>

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

was used in memes by everyone from Nicki Minaj to the Russian Embassy in the United Kingdom.¹⁷¹ However, his widespread use began to frustrate the alt-right, who saw him as their own mascot, so they transformed him from his innocent roots into an intentional symbol of hate. Alt-right 4Chan users purposefully mixed images of Pepe with Nazi propaganda in order to establish an anti-Semitic link.¹⁷² This was done in order to rescue him from what they called the “normies.”

Damaging Pepe’s versatility was not enough for the alt-right followers. They saw potential in using his strange, enigmatic versatility to attract new followers. Thus, now that they had tied him to their cause, their next step was to associate the meme with Trump’s campaign in order to push him into the mainstream. This attempt was highly successful and was quickly picked up and used by the Trump campaign.

The Clinton campaign was quick to point out the ties between the Trump campaign and white nationalists, calling half of Trump supporters a “basket of deplorables.”¹⁷³ This quickly backfired against her though as Trump supporters used it as a rallying cry and point of solidarity.¹⁷⁴ The Trump campaign quickly dove in and took advantage of the new rallying cry. Figure 2.5 is an example of a meme that was shared by Donald Trump Jr. shortly after the comment was made.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Nuzzi, Olivia. “How Pepe the Frog Became a Nazi Trump Supporter and Alt-Right Symbol.” *Daily Beast*. 13 Apr. 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-pepe-the-frog-became-a-nazi-trump-supporter-and-alt-right-symbol?ref=scroll>

¹⁷³ Merica, Dan, and Sophie Tatum. “Clinton expresses regret for saying 'half' of Trump supporters are 'deplorables'.” *CNN*. 12 Sep. 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/09/politics/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-basket-of-deplorables/index.html>

¹⁷⁴ Peoples, Steve, and Jill Colvin. “Political Risk for All in Trump-Clinton ‘Deplorables’ Debate.” *Associated Press*. 14 Sep. 2016, <https://www.apnews.com/70ef6df3d9f243d89c1dbf71f047a234>

Figure 2.5: “Deplorables” Meme¹⁷⁵



This image was shared on Instagram and shows Trump and his allies posing with Pepe as a sort of superhero group.

In response to the outpouring of Pepe/Trump memes, Clinton’s campaign published an explainer, calling the meme racist. The Anti-Defamation League followed suit, labeling the meme as a hate symbol.¹⁷⁶ This act was especially noteworthy to the alt-right because it aligned with their argument that white males and masculinity were under siege from the left.¹⁷⁷ Between Clinton’s explainer and her calling half of Trump supporters a “basket of deplorables,” Clinton had brought the issue into the mainstream, pushed many Trump supporters over the edge, and ultimately helped the alt-right with recruitment.

The alt-right was able to capitalize on the mainstream attention to attract disillusioned youth through memes, some sites aiming at children as young as eleven.¹⁷⁸ The alt-right used

¹⁷⁵ Trump, Donald Jr. (donaldjtrumpjr), “A friend sent me this.” Instagram, 10 Sep. 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BKMtdN5Bam5/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

¹⁷⁶ Ohlheiser, Abby. “Pepe the Frog became a hate symbol. Now he’s just a dead hate symbol.” *Washington Post*. 8 May 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/05/08/pepe-the-frog-became-a-hate-symbol-now-hes-just-a-dead-hate-symbol/>

¹⁷⁷ “Explaining the Alt-Right ‘deity’ of their ‘meme magic’.” *Southern Poverty Law Center*. Accessed 29 Sep. 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2017/explaining-alt-right-%E2%80%98deity%E2%80%99-their-%E2%80%98meme-magic%E2%80%99>

¹⁷⁸ Gibson, Caitlin. “‘Do you have white teenage sons? Listen up.’ How white supremacists are recruiting boys online.” *Washington Post*. 17 Sep. 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/on-parenting/do-you-have->

memes and social media to attract disaffected youth to their cause. Through anonymity, children earned respect from like-minded individuals and were treated like adults, providing a sense of community and purpose.¹⁷⁹

Alt-right memes and recruitment have had real-life consequences. In 2016, alt-right members in a 4Chan thread created memes trying to associate Clinton with sex trafficking.¹⁸⁰ Later that year the “Pizzagate” conspiracy theory from this thread led to an actual shooting at the alleged pizza parlor.¹⁸¹ In August of 2017, another alt-right follower arranged a protest in Charlottesville, Virginia called “Unite the Right”, that aimed at uniting multiple white nationalist groups to protest the removal of Confederate statues.¹⁸² This protest was meticulously planned and invites were spread throughout the same alt-right meme sharing pages.¹⁸³ The event quickly turned violent, leading to the death of a counter-protester and leaving many others injured. However, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), the violence at this rally was not stoked by the protesters alone. Russia’s disinformation campaign played a large role in stoking the racial tensions that led to bloodshed.¹⁸⁴

white-teenage-sons-listen-up-how-white-supremacists-are-recruiting-boys-online/2019/09/17/f081e806-d3d5-11e9-9343-40db57cf6abd_story.html

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Silverman, Craig. “How The Bizarre Conspiracy Theory Behind “Pizzagate” Was Spread.” *Buzzfeed News*. 4 Nov. 2016, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/fever-swamp-election>

¹⁸¹ Palma, Bethania. “The Roots of ‘Pedophile Ring’ Conspiracy Theories.” *Snopes*. 2 Sep. 2018, <https://www.snopes.com/news/2018/09/02/roots-pedophile-ring-conspiracy-theories/>

¹⁸² Lind, Dara. “Unite the Right, the violent white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, explained.” *Vox*. 14 Aug 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/8/12/16138246/charlottesville-nazi-rally-right-uva>

¹⁸³ Buchanan, Susy. “A fractured but energized movement tried to pull itself together — but ended up exposing even deeper rifts.” *SPLC*. 10 Feb. 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2018/memes-marches-why-far-right-might-never-be-‘united’>

¹⁸⁴ Shesgreen, Deirdre. “GOP lawmaker: Russian meddling stirred racial divisions at fatal Charlottesville rally.” *USA Today*. 11 Aug. 2018.

Russia and Election 2016

The main actors in the Russian meme campaign are Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA), fringe political groups, African-American political groups, and the Clinton campaign.

One of the more ominous trends that emerged during the 2016 election cycle was Russia's use of memes to disrupt the election. As a part of a mass disinformation campaign, Russian propaganda wing, the Internet Research Agency (IRA), posted thousands of sophisticated and humorous political internet memes from 2015 to 2017. This massive propaganda campaign shows the danger that memes can pose.

According to the U.S. House of Representatives, Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, in 2018, the United States indicted thirteen Russian nationals and three Russian organizations "for engaging in operations to interfere with U.S. political and electoral processes, including the 2016 presidential election."¹⁸⁵ In 2016, the Russian government launched a multi-pronged influence campaign against the United States with the goal of destroying faith in the democratic process and elevating Donald Trump's chances of winning the presidency.¹⁸⁶

Memes were amongst the many tools that Russia used to wage this disinformation campaign. Through the anonymity that many social media sites provided, Russian operatives were able to pose as legitimate citizens. On Facebook, Russia's IRA created 470 pages, over 80,000 pieces of organic content, many of which were meme advertisements, and reached

¹⁸⁵ "Exposing Russia's Effort to Sow Discord Online: The Internet Research Agency and Advertisements." U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. 16 Feb. 2018, <https://intelligence.house.gov/social-media-content/>

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

over 126 million users.¹⁸⁷ On Twitter, the IRA sent over 130,000 tweets, again, many of which were memes.¹⁸⁸

The operation typically supported marginalized political ideologies, like those of the alt-right and Black Lives Matter, in order to sow discord in the population and make political differences seem larger than they really were. The IRA fanned tensions amongst more extreme groups by spreading conspiracy theories and encouraging confrontation.¹⁸⁹ However, while the agency supported almost every candidate, they notably never put out memes in support of Clinton. In fact, the influence campaign worked to discredit Clinton more than any other candidate.¹⁹⁰

The IRA, like alt-right recruiters, used casual gateway memes to attract people to the pages where the more fringe memes were kept. The agency took its aim on almost everyone, from young progressives to middle age conservatives.¹⁹¹ Notably, the IRA targeted African American political interests. While most groups had only a couple of targeted pages, 30 pages were aimed at African Americans and garnered over 1.2 million followers.¹⁹² These pages attempted to lure in the black community through targeted memes about police shootings and black history.¹⁹³ In these pages, the IRA shared conspiracy theories, encouraged followers to stage rallies, and shared bogus information about the Clinton

¹⁸⁷ Isaac, Mike, and Daisuke Wakabayashi. "Russian Influence Reached 126 Million Through Facebook Alone." *New York Times*. 30 Nov. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/30/technology/facebook-google-russia.html>

¹⁸⁸ "Exposing Russia's Effort to Sow Discord Online: The Internet Research Agency and Advertisements

¹⁸⁹ Howard, Philip N., et. al. "The IRA, Social Media, and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018." *Computational Propaganda Research Project 2018*, (University of Oxford, 2018).

¹⁹⁰ Select Committee on Intelligence, Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, 116th Cong. 1st sess. 2019, S. Rep. 116-XX, 4.

¹⁹¹ Cole, Samantha. "Five Types of Facebook Memes Russia Used to Influence the 2016 US Election." *Vice*. 11 May 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/qvn433/facebook-memes-russia-election

¹⁹² Shane, Scott. "Five Takeaways From New Reports on Russia's Social Media Operations." *New York Times*. 18 Dec. 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/17/us/politics/takeaways-russia-social-media-operations.html>

¹⁹³ Ibid.

campaign, attempting to paint her as racist.¹⁹⁴ These pages also provided false voting rules and attempted to encourage Sanders supporters to vote for Independent candidates at election time.¹⁹⁵ Figure 2.6, is an example of a meme shared to discourage voting.

Figure 2.6: Voter Suppression Meme¹⁹⁶



The meme in figure 2.6 shows how Russia attempted to discourage African Americans from voting in 2016. The meme was made to look like it was from an anti-police violence group and was shared in Facebook groups aimed at African Americans.¹⁹⁷

Russia's involvement did not end after the election or even after it was uncovered. Some accounts have even seen an increase in activity.¹⁹⁸ The IRA has continued to focus on political divides by highlighting public policy, national security issues, and other issues that younger generations care about.¹⁹⁹ Throughout the 2018 midterm election and going into the

¹⁹⁴ Ibid; Hernandez, Salvador. Russian Trolls Spread Baseless Conspiracy Theories Like Pizzagate And QAnon After The Election." *Buzzfeed News*. 15 Aug. 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/salvadorhernandez/russian-trolls-spread-baseless-conspiracy-theories-like>

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ "The Disinformation Report." *New Knowledge*. 17 Dec. 2018, <https://www.newknowledge.com/articles/the-disinformation-report/>

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Howard, Philip N., et. al. "The IRA, Social Media, and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018."

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

2020 cycle, this new Russian trend has expanded and sophisticated. In October of 2018, both the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and the Office of Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) separately expressed their concern that foreign governments were attempting to attack our democracy through similar propaganda campaigns.

Analysis

The three meme campaigns were fighting for three different things, but their meme usage contained some similar aspects. First, they actively and intentionally used memes as a part of their movement. Second, they used them to recruit and unite their bases. Russia took a nuance to this approach by uniting groups in order to divide the country. Third, memes were used to counter causes. Finally, in all three cases, memes were used as a gateway to other forms of participation.

Intentional Usage

Communication and journalism professor Limor Shifman argued that memes are a form of grassroots action. The three events detailed in this chapter highlight this point. In each case, memes were intentionally used as a part of a campaign or protest. Leaders from the Occupy Wall Street movement had worked in the advertising business and therefore recognized the power of imagery. In the hands of companies and politicians, imagery is successful, but Lasn passed that power on to ordinary citizens, amplifying the effect. This aligns with Shifman's argument that people prefer memes from average citizens. In the case of the alt-right, leaders and followers included memes as an integral part of their ideology and representation. Memes helped alt-right adherents eschew traditional media and ideology as communication professor Mia Moody-Ramirez and journalism scholar Andrew Church argued. Finally, the IRA went beyond merely incorporating memes into its process, it

weaponized them. The IRA took evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkin's idea of memes as transmitting units and turned them into germs to infect political trust in the United States.

Recruiting and Uniting

Shifman also argued that memes act as persuasion and connective action. The three events demonstrate these ideas through their use of memes to recruit and unite. In the Occupy case, early memes were used as advertisements to let people know about the protest. The "99 Percent" meme then acted to unite an ideology around the movement. In the case of the alt-right, memes were used to attract like-minded individuals, including children, and provide them with an outlet to express their own similar views. In the Russian IRA case, memes were used to attract people to their pages. However, in the IRA case, their focus was less on uniting individuals and more on dividing a country by uniting fringe groups.

Memes as Discourse

Communication professor Ryan Milner argued that memes are a form of antagonistic discourse and this research corroborates that finding. In the Occupy case, counter memes quickly sprouted up to dispute the Occupy narrative. In the case of the alt-right, followers used memes to counter the mainstream narrative on race. Finally, the IRA used memes to fuel antagonism between opposing political ideologies.

Memes as Gateway Participation

Memes can act as a form of political participation, but they can also act as a gateway to more forms of participation. Public policy professor Matthew Baum argued that people can be more affected by entertaining or emotional information because information piggybacks onto the more entertaining information.²⁰⁰ This was true in the events studied in

²⁰⁰ Baum, Matthew A., and Angela S. Jamison. "Soft News and the Four Oprah Effects," 123-124.

this chapter. During the Occupy movements, many people that did not live near the original protest site shared memes in order to participate. Eventually, however, some individuals took the next step and created events in their home towns. Members of the alt-right were also not satisfied with just sharing memes. Eventually, they began staging rallies, while the more extreme members turned to violent acts. For Russia, memes were intended to only be a gateway to either more aggressive participation or apathy and distrust in the democratic process.

Conclusion

Memes can be fun and useful tools to share and spread simple information, but they can also be sinister tools to manipulate a country. This chapter confirmed the idea that memes are used as tools for recruiting and unification of ideology. However, they are also forms of political discourse and can help groups to encourage other forms of political participation. In this chapter, I also found an interesting trend showing that memes sites also encouraged conspiracy theories. One area of further study could look at how conspiracy theories affect political participation.

Conspiracy Theory: Birtherism: vs. President Obama

Introduction

Between the time Donald Trump announced his candidacy for president and the end of his first year in office (2017), he had endorsed and spread almost twenty separate conspiracy theories.²⁰¹ President Trump's affinity for conspiracy theories, however, did not begin with his presidential campaign. As early as March 2011, Donald Trump, then a reality TV star, gave credence to the long-standing conspiracy theory that President Barack Obama was not born in the United States and therefore not eligible to serve as the President of the United States.²⁰²

This theory, nicknamed "birtherism" was not started by Trump, rather its origins are tied to the Democratic Party. In 2004, an Illinois political candidate, Andy Martin, made the first public claim that Obama had been born and raised outside the United States and was a Muslim.²⁰³ This conspiracy would haunt Obama throughout his 2008 candidacy and continue to linger following his inauguration in January 2009. Ultimately, President Obama released a copy of his long-form Hawaiian birth certificate in April 2011, but even then, many continued to question his birth and religion.²⁰⁴ The development and response to birtherism

²⁰¹ Tani, Maxwell. "18 Outlandish Conspiracy Theories Donald Trump has Floated on the Campaign Trail and in the White House." *Business Insider*, 30 Nov. 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-conspiracy-theories-2016-5#questions-about-a-former-bill-clinton-aides-suicide-3>.

²⁰² Smith, Ben, et al. "Birtherism: Where It All Began." *POLITICO*, 24 Apr. 2011, <https://www.politico.com/story/2011/04/birtherism-where-it-all-began-053563>.

²⁰³ Rutenberg, Jim. "The Man Behind the Whispers About Obama." *The New York Times*, 13 Oct. 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/13/us/politics/13martin.html>.

²⁰⁴ President Obama's Long Form Birth Certificate, *National Archives and Records Administration*, 27 Apr. 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/04/27/president-obamas-long-form-birth-certificate>.

raise an important question. What effect can a conspiracy theory have on a politician's candidacy and his or her political objectives while in office? This chapter attempts to give answers to this question through the study of the birtherism conspiracy theory's effects on President Obama's candidacies and administration. A conspiracy theory can affect a candidate's campaign and policy objectives by distracting from the issues and inflaming public distrust.

Two terms need to be defined. First, *Merriam-Webster* defines a conspiracy theory as "a theory that explains an event or set of circumstances as the result of a secret plot by usually powerful conspirators."²⁰⁵ In most research on American conspiracy theory the explanation of former Columbia University American history professor, Richard Hofstadter, is used. His explanation of conspiracy theory states that "exponents [do not] see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a "vast" or "gigantic" conspiracy as the *motive force* in historical events."²⁰⁶ Second, in the context of this section, *paranoia* does not denote a clinical or psychological state. Rather, it is used colloquially.²⁰⁷

Previous Research

Conspiracy theories are not a well-researched area, at least partially due to the stigmatization that is tied to conspiracy theories and the difficulties that can lie in distinguishing real conspiracies from theories.²⁰⁸ The research that does exist focuses heavily on the psychological and sociological aspects behind conspiracy theories and theorists. These

²⁰⁵ "Conspiracy Theory." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Web. 9 July 2018.

²⁰⁶ Hofstadter, Richard. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics: and Other Essays*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 29.

²⁰⁷ Walker, Jesse. *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 18.

²⁰⁸ Swami, Viren, and Rebecca Coles. "The Truth Is Out There," *The Psychologist*, 23, no. 7, (June 2010), 560-563, <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-23/edition-7/truth-out-there>.

studies generally argue whether conspiracy theorists existed on the fringes of society²⁰⁹ or that nearly anyone could be capable of touting a theory.²¹⁰ More recent studies have argued that conspiracy theories generally exist on the margins, but have become an integral part of American society. In fact, many Americans, from the marginal to the most central have succumbed to one conspiracy theory or another at some point in time.²¹¹ In these studies, conspiracy theory is seen as the manner by which people process and react to political information.²¹²

One of these studies, conducted by University of Miami political science professors Joseph Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent also attempted to address the factors that encourage belief in conspiracy theories. They concluded that race, education, generational differences, and other marginalizing factors create a level of paranoia that provides fertile ground for conspiracy theories to flourish.²¹³ These factors all have something in common. Those that believe in conspiracy theories tend to feel like they do not have power.²¹⁴ This finding implies that belief in conspiracy theories does not necessarily come from a pathological mind but from political and sociological feelings of powerlessness.²¹⁵

Most of these studies focused on the uniquely American style of conspiracy theory. The research behind American conspiracy theories suggests that there is a growing subset of theories revolving around American politics. Research shows that this dates back to Colonial

²⁰⁹ Hofstadter, Richard. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics: and Other Essays*, 29; Uscinski, Joseph E., and Joseph M Parent. *American Conspiracy Theories*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

²¹⁰ Stempel, Carl, et al. "Media Use, Social Structure, and Belief in 9/11 Conspiracy Theories." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 84, no. 2 (2007), 355–356.

²¹¹ Fenster, Mark. *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 8; Walker, *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory*, 18.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 8.

²¹³ Uscinski, Joseph E., and Parent, Joseph M., *American Conspiracy Theories*, 86.

²¹⁴ Stempel, Carl, et al. "Media Use, Social Structure, and Belief in 9/11 Conspiracy Theories", 353.

²¹⁵ Swami, Viren, and Rebecca Coles. "The Truth Is Out There"

America. In the 1700s, a lack of power and say in colonial affairs led colonists to view the monarchy as a looming threat. Uscinski and Parent claimed that this sense of threat and paranoia led the founding fathers to incite a rebellion based on a theory that King George III was conspiring to enslave the American people.²¹⁶ A study by University of Utah history professor, Robert Goldberg, argued that this paranoia was then built into the structure of the American government through the separation of powers.²¹⁷ Throughout the growth of the nation, a paranoid style of thinking has uniquely adapted to American society and to the special role that Americans play in the world.²¹⁸

Kathryn Olmstead, a history professor at UC Davis, detailed the history of the conspiracy theory movement in America. Her research explains that between the founding and the early 20th century, conspiracy theorists aimed their angst towards the wealthy and the marginalized religious groups, but according to Olmstead, this all changed in 1918. The government, under the power of the Sedition Act of 1918, raided the home of former Congressman and conspiracy theorist, Charles A. Lindbergh Sr. For many, this act was an insult to their constitutional rights by the very government sworn to protect those rights. From this point forward, conspiracy theorists had a new nemesis.²¹⁹

World War I gave conspiracy theorists their first chance to take aim at the government. This began with claims that bankers and special interests had influenced the government to go to war. By the 1930s, conspiracy theorists had aimed their full attention on

²¹⁶ Uscinski, Joseph E., and Parent, Joseph M., *American Conspiracy Theories*, 1.

²¹⁷ Fenster, Mark. *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, 6.

²¹⁸ Goldberg, Robert Alan. *Enemies within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 1.

²¹⁹ Olmsted, Kathryn S. *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13-14.

the government and blamed it for a wide range of events. By the end of the 1930s, the White House became the focus of conspiracy theories, with the president as the lead conspirator.²²⁰ Theories involving the President claimed that he would find or create an excuse to enter another war in order to expand presidential powers. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the theorists claimed that President Roosevelt had either pushed the Japanese to attack the United States or had received warnings in the weeks leading up to December 7 and ignored them.²²¹

The fear of intervention and theories surrounding World War II shaped conspiracy theories for years to come. During this time, the government was seen as wasteful and duplicitous.²²² While the threats of communism and Soviet espionage gave the government a short break from the conspiracy theorists, the threats also attracted a new set of conspiracy theorists within the government. These theorists from within the government used all of their power to defeat their imagined enemies, creating an environment within the government that would later result in fodder for the theorists on the outside.²²³

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy (JFK) dramatically ended the break. As one of the most intensively studied events in U.S. history, JFK's assassination inspired some of the most potent and lasting conspiracy theories in America history.²²⁴ In the early years after the assassination, even those at the Central Intelligence Agency and in top White House positions believed that it could have been a true conspiracy.²²⁵ Several studies detailed

²²⁰ Ibid., 28-30, 43

²²¹ Ibid., 65.

²²² Ibid., 80.

²²³ Ibid., 85, 110.

²²⁴ Goldberg, Robert Alan. *Enemies within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, 106.

²²⁵ Olmsted, Kathryn S. *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, 112.

how conspiracy grew from the social fringes to the mainstream in America. Olmstead noted that the plausibility of JFK conspiracy theories brought them from the social fringes to the mainstream in America. A new crop of dedicated amateurs entered the game to dig up clues about the assassination, and for the first time, many were women. At the same time, the Soviet Union fed the theorists by planting false stories in its papers in order to stoke distrust in the U.S. government.²²⁶

The JFK assassination conspiracy theorists turned conspiracy hunting into a sport and in 1968, the American people elected one of its top hunters, Richard Nixon. Nixon believed that the liberal media, democrats, intellectuals, former presidents, and Jews were plotting something awful and he was the man to stop them.²²⁷ Following Nixon's resignation after Watergate, the Church Committee unveiled numerous shady programs from the intelligence community showing the people that the government was just as suspicious of the people as they were of it. Watergate and Nixon's resignation helped to dissolve many of the social constraints on conspiracy theories. This true conspiracy proved that conspiracy theorists were not crazy, emboldened government distrust, and helped get Ronald Reagan elected. Reagan, however, chose not to condemn Nixon and labeled Nixon's investigation a "witch hunt."²²⁸ This along with Watergate and the Pentagon Papers led to a new level of government distrust.²²⁹

²²⁶ Ibid., 136-138.

²²⁷ Hughes, Ken. "A Rough Guide to Richard Nixon's Conspiracy Theories." *Miller Center*, 7 July 2017, http://millercenter.org/the-presidency/educational-resources/a-rough-guide-to-richard-nixon-s-conspiracy-theories#Conspiracy_Theorist-in-Chief.

²²⁸ Walker, Jesse. *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory*, 261.

²²⁹ Olmsted, Kathryn S. *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, 161.

Another study focused on a “conspiracy fever” that hit the film industry beginning in the 1970s, which caused average citizens to become enamored with these paranoid ideas.²³⁰ By the 1980s, Americans were sure that the government was up to no good.²³¹ By the 1990s, conspiracy theory centered television shows and movies became mainstream. Shows like the *X-Files* and movies like *The Da Vinci Code* were hits. Conspiracy theories during this era grew a fandom, further eroding the lines between what is acceptable to believe and discuss and what is not.²³²

By the 1990s, government trust continued to plummet and many conspiracy theories were taken seriously and had even become the “default assumption” by those in power. At this point, only 21% of Americans expressed faith in their government.²³³ Like the attack on Pearl Harbor, the attacks of 9/11 were easy fodder for theorists, but this time, they had a bigger market and a better platform. By the late 2000s, almost everyone had one theory or another that they believed.

Modern politics has been affected by the increased distrust of government. By 2009, between 60-80% of Americans believe that the assassination of President Kennedy was a conspiracy.²³⁴ During Obama’s first term, he was forced to deny conspiracy theories about contraception mandates for religious organizations and “death panels” that would choose who would live and die under his healthcare act. These conspiracy theories may have helped Republicans sweep the house during the 2010 midterms.²³⁵

²³⁰ Walker, Jesse. *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory*, 168, 171.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 168, 171.

²³² Goldberg, Robert Alan. *Enemies within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, 247.

²³³ Olmsted, Kathryn S. *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, 173-174, 202, 204; Walker, 276.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 276.

²³⁵ Uscinski, Joseph E., and Parent, Joseph M., *American Conspiracy Theories*, 4-5.

While many researchers have studied the history of conspiracy theory in America, little research has been done on conspiracy theories and even less on their consequences. Researchers have claimed that they are likely to be harmful, but few have provided evidence of the harm.²³⁶ The potential consequences of conspiracy theories have been described as both potentially good and potentially bad. University of Florida law professor, Mark Fenster, claimed that conspiracy theories can spur social change but also obscure important political issues and sow discord.²³⁷ Two social psychology researchers, Daniel Jolley and Karen Douglas, explored the potential harms of conspiracy theories with a study aimed at the relationship between conspiracy theories and political participation. In this study, they found that exposure to conspiracy theories reduced government trust and political participation.²³⁸ Another study by Douglas and social psychology researcher Robbie Sutton, focused on the conspiracy theories surrounding Princess Diana's death revealed that individuals are unaware of how much impact that conspiracy theories have on their attitude and beliefs. The researchers noted that individuals understood that they were influenced by conspiracy theories but they did not realize the degree that the theories were impacting their choices and beliefs.²³⁹ These researchers later argued that this attitude change can steer public opinion and affect policy change.²⁴⁰

²³⁶ Sunstein, Cass R., and Adrian Vermeule. "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures*." *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 2, (2009), 211-212; Jolley, Daniel, and Karen M. Douglas. "The Social Consequences of Conspiracism: Exposure to Conspiracy Theories Decreases Intentions to Engage in Politics and to Reduce One's Carbon Footprint." *British Journal of Psychology*, vol. 105, no. 1, (2013), 35-56.

²³⁷ Fenster, Mark. *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, 109.

²³⁸ Jolley, Daniel, and Karen M. Douglas. "The Social Consequences of Conspiracism: Exposure to Conspiracy Theories Decreases Intentions to Engage in Politics and to Reduce One's Carbon Footprint.", 53.

²³⁹ Douglas, Karen M. and Robbie M. Sutton. "The Hidden Impact of Conspiracy Theories: Perceived and Actual Influence of Theories Surrounding the Death of Princess Diana." *The Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 148, no. 2, (2008), 217.

²⁴⁰ Douglas, Karen M. and Robbie M. Sutton. "Climate Change: Why the Conspiracy Theories are Dangerous." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 71, no. 2, (2015), 99.

Methodology

In order to research a conspiracy theory's effects on a politician's candidacy and administration, I have picked the 'birtherism' conspiracy theory. The birtherism theory claimed that candidate and later President Barack Obama was born abroad and therefore ineligible to serve as president of the United States and that he was a practicing Muslim. This theory questioned his political authenticity and eligibility and is therefore intertwined with politics. Due to the political nature of this theory, it is an ideal case to study the effects a conspiracy theory has on a politician.

The first questions of Obama's background surfaced in summer 2004 after his famous speech at the Democratic National Convention and persisted throughout his presidency.²⁴¹ In order to focus on the political effects this theory had on Obama's candidacy and administration, I will limit the research from June 2004 until January 2017.

A large amount of data already exists on this theory in the form of polling data, articles, press releases, blogs, and *Snopes.com* fact checks. Therefore, this section combines the existing data in order to perform a descriptive analysis.

Data

Timeline

On July 27, 2004, then-Senator Barack Obama gave his famous keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention, launching the political hype that set him on the path for the presidency in 2008.²⁴² With that attention, however, came consequences. On August 10, 2004, a political candidate from Illinois, Andy Martin, gave a press conference.

²⁴¹ Rutenberg, Jim. "The Man Behind the Whispers About Obama."

²⁴² Leibovich, Mark. "The Speech That Made Obama." *New York Times*, 27 July 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/27/magazine/the-speech-that-made-obama.html>.

I feel sad having to expose Barack Obama, but the man is a complete fraud. The truth is going to surprise, and disappoint, and outrage many people who were drawn to him. He has lied to the American people, and he has sought to misrepresent his own heritage.²⁴³

Martin went on to claim that Obama was a Muslim who was attempting to conceal his religious identity.²⁴⁴ In December 2006, a man named Ted Sampley took Martin's words further. He blogged about Obama's secret Muslim identity, theorizing how and why he would be Muslim and the impact that it could mean for America if he became president. In January 2007, Sampley's blog post was picked up by the conservative message board, Free Republic.²⁴⁵

During the 2008 primary elections, the theory that Obama was a secret Muslim morphed into the birtherism theory. According to *Snopes.com*, the first known instance of this shift was on March 1, 2008. The message board post on Free Republic stated:

I was told today that Obama swore in on a Koran for his Senate seat. I do not believe he did. Can someone clarify this for me? I am under the impression only a Congressman has so far sworn in on a Koran. Also that Obama's mother gave birth to him overseas and then immediately flew into Hawaii and registered his birth as having taken place in Hawaii.²⁴⁶

²⁴³ Martin, Andy. "More Lies from Snake Lips." *Super Hunky* (blog), 10 Aug. 2004, <http://articles.superhunky.com/4/173>.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Sampley, Ted. "Obama: Who Is He?" *U.S. Veteran Dispatch* (blog), 29 Dec. 2006, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-bloggers/1776141/posts>.

²⁴⁶ Emery, David. "FACT CHECK: Did Clinton Supporters Start the 'Birther' Movement?" *Snopes.com*, 18 Sept. 2016, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/hillary-clinton-started-birther-movement/>.

Four days later, this post had morphed into a full-fledged theory in a blog post claiming that Obama was not only Muslim but born abroad in Kenya.²⁴⁷ About a month later, ardent fans of Hillary Clinton picked up this theory and began spreading these rumors through chain emails.²⁴⁸ In response to the growing conspiracy theory over his background, Senator Obama released a copy of his short-form certificate of live birth to *The Daily Kos* in June 2008 and created a website—www.fightthesmears.com—that aimed to correct the inaccuracies surrounding his religion and birth.²⁴⁹

On August 28, 2008, Obama accepted the Democratic Party's nomination for president and officially entered the general campaign against Senator John McCain.²⁵⁰ Just one month before the election, a woman at a John McCain rally questioned Obama's background and stated, "I can't trust Obama. I have read about him and he's not, he's not uh — he's an Arab. He's not —". McCain quickly cut her off and corrected her, but the audience continued to shout slurs about Obama and his background.²⁵¹

²⁴⁷ Peters, Alan. "Freedoms Enemy - The Obama Story." *Ruthless Roundup* (blog), 5 Mar. 2008, <http://alanpetersroundup.blogspot.com/2008/03/freedoms-enemies-obama-story.html>.

²⁴⁸ Cheney, Kyle, and Nick Gass. "No, Clinton Didn't Start the Birther Thing. This Guy Did." *POLITICO*, 16 Sept. 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/09/birther-movement-founder-trump-clinton-228304>.

²⁴⁹ Moulitsas, Markos. "Obama's Birth Certificate." *Daily Kos*, 12 June 2008, [https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2008/6/12/534616/-; Wormald, Benjamin. "False Rumors that Obama is a Muslim." *Pew Research Center*, 20 Nov. 2008, <http://www.journalism.org/2008/11/20/false-rumors-that-obama-is-a-muslim/>](https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2008/6/12/534616/-; Wormald, Benjamin.)

²⁵⁰ Naylor, Brian. "Obama Accepts Nomination with Sweeping Speech." *NPR*, 29 Aug. 2008, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94110630>.

²⁵¹ Martin, Jonathan, and Amie Parnes. "McCain: Obama not an Arab, crowd boos." 11 Oct. 2008, *POLITICO*, <https://www.politico.com/story/2008/10/mccain-obama-not-an-arab-crowd-boos-014479>.

Just over a month after the McCain rally, Obama was elected President of the United States.²⁵² Before the Electoral College votes were counted, numerous lawsuits concerning his place of birth and eligibility were filed in an attempt to prevent his impending presidency.²⁵³

Even after President Obama's inauguration, the theory persisted. In March 2009, Bill Posey (R-FL) introduced a bill that would require presidential candidates to prove their citizenship, however, it was never enacted.²⁵⁴ Later, in August, California Attorney Orly Taitz, who had filed many of the lawsuits concerning Obama's birth and eligibility, released a fake Kenyan birth certificate to *World Net Daily* and motioned in a U.S. District Court for its authentication.²⁵⁵

In early 2010, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee attempted to seize the theory's power as a weapon during the upcoming midterm elections. In January, the committee released a memo suggesting that democratic candidates ask their conservative opponents if they believe in the theory in order to reduce their credibility.²⁵⁶ However, this tactic proved ineffective, as Republicans dominated the 2010 elections in a historic sweep.²⁵⁷

In December 2010, newly elected Democratic Governor of Hawaii, Neil Abercrombie, came forward as a friend of the Obama family and stated that he wanted to

²⁵² Hertling, Mark, et al. "Barack Obama Elected 44th U.S. President, Nov. 4, 2008". *POLITICO*, 4 Nov. 2013, <https://www.politico.com/story/2013/11/barack-obama-elected-44th-us-president-nov-4-2008-099280>.

²⁵³ Jonsson, Patrik. "A Last Electoral Hurdle for Obama." *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 Nov. 2008, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2008/1126/a-last-electoral-hurdle-for-obama>.

²⁵⁴ H.R. 1503 - 111th Congress: To amend the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 to require the principal campaign committee ... 2009. Accessed August 12, 2018, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/111th-congress/house-bill/1503>.

²⁵⁵ "Is This Really Smoking Gun of Obama's Kenyan Birth?" *WND*, World Net Daily, 2 Aug. 2009, <http://www.wnd.com/2009/08/105764/>.

²⁵⁶ Raju, Manu, et al. "DSCC Urges Quick Offensive for 2010." *POLITICO*, 26 Jan. 2010, <https://www.politico.com/story/2010/01/dscc-urges-quick-offensive-for-2010-032003>.

²⁵⁷ Storey, Tim. "GOP Makes Historic State Legislative Gains in 2010." Rasmussen Reports, 10 Dec. 2010, https://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/political_commentary/commentary_by_tim_storey/gop_makes_historic_state_legislative_gains_in_2010.

clear the air once and for all and prove that Obama was American born.²⁵⁸ Governor Abercrombie was later forced to back down due to privacy laws, giving new life to the theory.²⁵⁹ At the beginning of the 2011 legislative sessions, in anticipation of the 2012 election cycle, at least ten states put forward bills that would require presidential candidates to prove that they were born in the United States.²⁶⁰

One month later, March 17, 2011, mere weeks before President Obama announced his reelection campaign, Donald Trump came forward to reignite birtherism during an interview with *ABC*. Trump attached his name to the theory and proceeded to appear on multiple programs over the next few weeks touting the claim.²⁶¹ In response to the revival of birtherism, prominent politicians from both sides came forward to quell the uproar, including former president Bill Clinton, and eventual Republican candidate for president, Mitt Romney.²⁶² The Obama White House also came forward and released a press statement with his long-form Hawaiian birth certificate attached on April 27, 2011.²⁶³ Along with that press release, President Obama gave a speech in the White House Press Briefing Room. In that speech, he stated:

Now, normally I would not comment on something like [birtherism], because obviously there's a lot of stuff swirling in the press on at any given day and I've got

²⁵⁸ Stolberg, Sheryl Gay. "Hawaii's Governor Seeks to Silence 'Birthers'." *New York Times*, 24 Dec. 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/25/us/25hawaii.html>.

²⁵⁹ Barr, Andy, et al. "Birther Debate Alive across U.S." *POLITICO*, 14 Feb. 2011, <https://www.politico.com/story/2011/02/birther-debate-alive-across-us-049444>.

²⁶⁰ Barr, Andy, et al. *Birther Debate Alive across U.S.*

²⁶¹ Mooney, Alexander. "Trump Says He Has Doubts about Obama's Birth Place." *CNN*, 17 Mar. 2011, <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2011/03/17/trump-says-he-has-doubts-about-obama%E2%80%99s-birth-place/>; Kessler, Glenn. "A Look at Trump's 'Birther' Statements." *Washington Post*, 28 Apr. 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/a-look-at-trumps-birther-statements/2011/04/27/AFcOYb1E_blog.html?utm_term=.0ec96aa693b8.

²⁶² Hunt, Kasie, et al. "Mitt: Obama Born Here, Period." *POLITICO*, 13 Apr. 2011, <https://www.politico.com/story/2011/04/mitt-obama-born-here-period-053073>.

²⁶³ Pfeiffer, Dan. "President Obama's Long Form Birth Certificate."

other things to do. But two weeks ago, when the Republican House had put forward a budget that will have huge consequences potentially to the country, and when I gave a speech about my budget and how I felt that we needed to invest in education and infrastructure and making sure that we had a strong safety net for our seniors even as we were closing the deficit, during that entire week the dominant news story wasn't about these huge, monumental choices that we're going to have to make as a nation. It was about my birth certificate. And that was true on most of the news outlets that were represented here.²⁶⁴

During the birtherism high point, Democrats again tried to use the situation to their advantage by sending emails to donors using the issue to ask for contributions to “stop these senseless political games.”²⁶⁵ President Obama was eventually reelected in November 2012.²⁶⁶

As Obama was finishing his last two years as president, one of birtherism's major touters, Donald Trump, announced his bid for the presidency.²⁶⁷ Once he accepted the official Republican nomination, media outlets brought the issue up again, asking Trump what his current stance was. In September 2016, he announced that he believed that Obama was

²⁶⁴ Obama, Barack. “Remarks by the President.” *National Archives and Records Administration*, 27 Apr. 2011, <https://www.obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/04/27/remarks-president>.

²⁶⁵ CNN Political Unit, “Dems raise money off of birther bills.”, *CNN*, 22 Apr. 2011, <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2011/04/22/dems-raise-money-off-birther-bills/#more-156222>.

²⁶⁶ Fahrenthold, David A. “Obama Reelected as President.” *Washington Post*, 7 Nov. 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/decision2012/after-grueling-campaign-polls-open-for-election-day-2012/2012/11/06/d1c24c98-2802-11e2-b4e0-346287b7e56c_story.html?utm_term=.e86809bd95c9.

²⁶⁷ Nasr, Reem. “Donald Trump announces candidacy for president.” *CNBC*, 15 Jun. 2016, <https://www.cnbc.com/2015/06/16/donald-trump-announces-candidacy-for-president.html>.

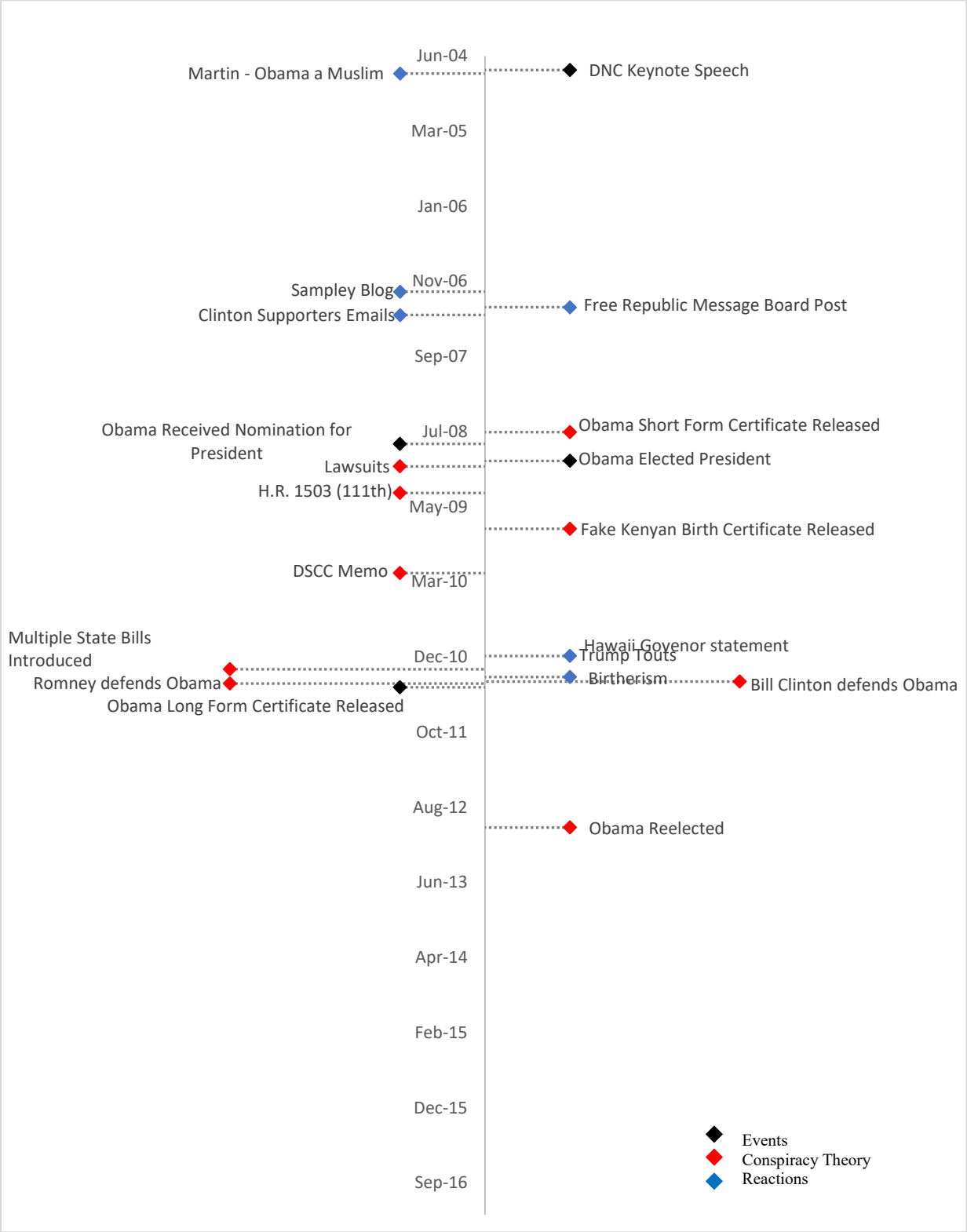
born in the United States.²⁶⁸ However, less than one year into his first term, President Trump reportedly asked a Senator in private conversations if Obama's birth certificates were legitimate.²⁶⁹ Also in 2017, Obama's Trump-supporting half-brother re-released a faked birth certificate for Obama that stated he was born in Kenya.²⁷⁰ While these incidents fall outside of the scope of this chapter, they highlight the continued presence of the theory. On the next page, Figure 3.1 illustrates the timeline of significant events surrounding the birtherism theory that are listed and cited in this outline.

²⁶⁸ Collinson, Stephen, and Jeremy Diamond. "Trump Finally Admits it: 'President Barack Obama was born in the United States'." *CNN*, 16 Sep. 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/15/politics/donald-trump-obama-birther-united-states/index.html>.

²⁶⁹ Lopez, German. "Trump is still reportedly pushing his racist 'birther' conspiracy theory about Obama." *Vox*, 29 Nov. 2017, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/11/29/16713664/trump-obama-birth-certificate>

²⁷⁰ Walker, Peter. "Barack Obama's Trump-supporting half-brother Malik tweets Kenya birth certificate." *Independent*, 10 Mar. 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/barack-obama-half-brother-malik-kenya-birth-certificate-tweet-donald-trump-supporter-a7622346.html>

Figure 3.1: Birtherism Event Timeline²⁷¹



²⁷¹ Created by author from review of Birtherism related reports.

Polls

Throughout the timeline of the birtherism conspiracy theory, numerous polls were gathered that measured interest, belief, and media saturation of the theory. The following polls show the effects that the theory had on Obama's presidential campaigns and tenure in office. Table 3.1 shows the percentage of individuals who believed Obama was a Muslim in 2008 and that it affected their desire for him to be elected president.

Table 3.1: Nationwide Poll - March 24-27, 2008²⁷²

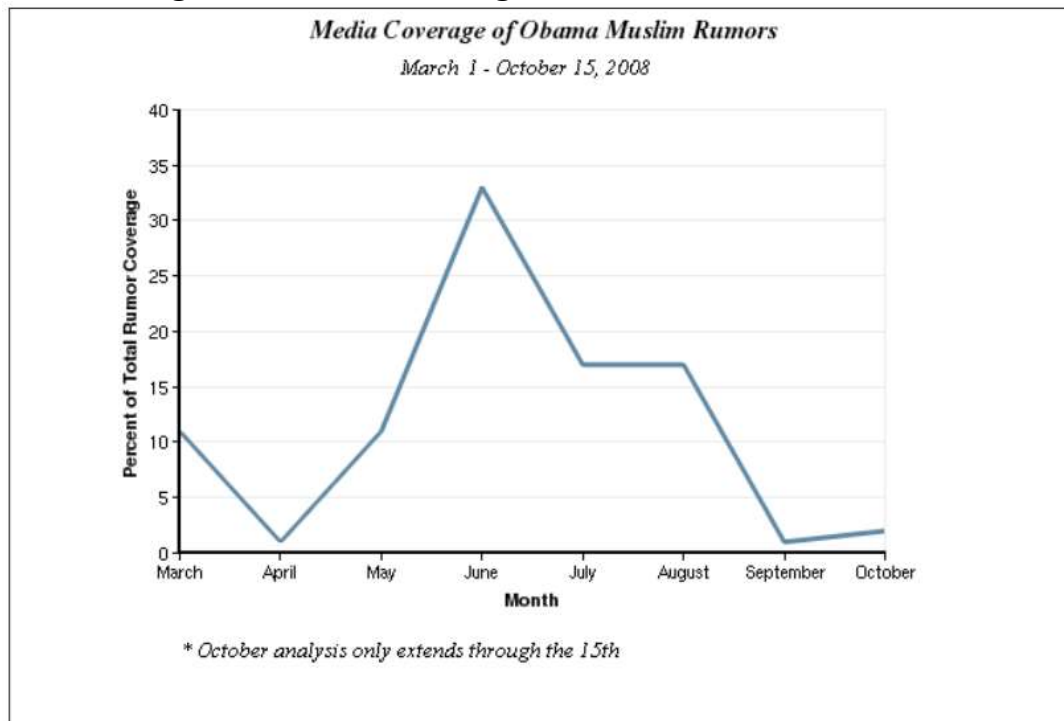
<i>Can you tell me in your own words why you least want to see Barack Obama elected president? [OPEN-ENDED]</i>	
Based on 234 national adults who least want to see Obama elected; ±8 percentage points	
	2008 Mar 24-27
	%
Inexperienced/Not qualified	39
Do not trust him	15
Muslim	12
Disagree with his views	11
Dislike his religious affiliation	8
Too liberal	6
Racist	5
His age/Too young	3
Do not like his attitude	3
Don't know enough about him	2
Scared of him	2
Lacks a platform	2
Other	10
No reason in particular (vol.)	1
No opinion	1
Percentages add to more than 100% due to multiple responses.	
March 24-27, 2008	
(vol.) = Volunteered response	
GALLUP POLL	

²⁷² Saad, Lydia. "Presidential Candidates' Weaknesses in Depth." *Gallup*, 2 Apr. 2008, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/105994/presidential-candidates-weaknesses-depth.aspx>.

As Table 3.1 shows, 12% of individuals who claimed they would not vote for Obama, stated that their reason was due to Obama being a Muslim in an open-ended question. Another 8% stated that they disliked his religious affiliation, however, they did not state what they believed his affiliation to be. The belief that Obama was a Muslim was from the early birtherism theory, therefore, birtherism affected these individuals intended vote.

Over the next few months, the *Pew Research Center* tracked the media coverage of the Islamic portion of birtherism. Figure 3.2 shows the percent of media coverage over the religion rumors during the 2008 campaign.

Figure 3.2: Media Coverage – March 1-October 15, 2008²⁷³



As Figure 3.2 shows, media coverage of the Obama Muslim rumors was only at 10% when the previous *Gallup* poll (Figure 2) was taken but had skyrocketed to almost a third of

²⁷³ "How the News Media Covered Religion in the General Election." *Pew Research Center*, 20 Nov. 2008, http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/legacy/Religion_gen_election_FINAL%2011-20_0.pdf

media coverage by June 2008. The effects of this media coverage spike can be seen in Table 3.2. Table 3.2 shows how many Democrats were swayed by the concern that Obama was Muslim.

Table 3.2: National Poll – July 15, 2008²⁷⁴

All Voters	Candidate Preference		
	<u>Obama</u>	<u>McCain</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>
<i>Belief Obama is Muslim Sways More Democrats</i>			
<i>Obama is...</i>			
Christian	52%	39%	12%
Muslim	37%	51%	9%
Heard Mixed	33%	48%	19%
Haven't Heard	48%	33%	19%
Democrats	82%	9%	9%
Christian	90%	5%	5%
Muslim/Heard mixed	62%	19%	19%
<i>Obama "gap"</i>	-28		
Independents	42%	41%	17%
Christian	42%	42%	16%
Muslim/Heard mixed	34%	50%	16%
<i>Obama "gap"</i>	-8		
Republicans	10%	82%	8%
Christian	10%	84%	6%
Muslim/Heard mixed	10%	85%	5%
<i>Obama "gap"</i>	0		
<i>Pew Research</i>			

Table 3.2 reveals that the belief that Obama was Muslim significantly affected members of Obama's own party and therefore voters that would have been more likely to vote for him in the first place. The belief that Obama was Muslim persisted throughout his

²⁷⁴ Dimock, Michael. "Belief that Obama is Muslim is Durable, Bipartisan – but Most Likely to Sway Democratic Votes." *Pew Research Center*, 15 Jul. 2008, <http://www.pewresearch.org/2008/07/15/belief-that-obama-is-muslim-is-durable-bipartisan-but-most-likely-to-sway-democratic-votes/>.

presidency. Table 3.3 shows how many individuals continued to believe that Obama was Muslim towards the end of his presidency.

Table 3.3: Nationwide Poll - September 4-8, 2015²⁷⁵

<i>Do you happen to know what religion Barack Obama is?</i>	
Protestant/Christian	39%
Catholic	4%
Jewish	1%
Mormon/LDS	2%
Muslim	29%
Other	1%
Not Religious	11%
No Opinion	14%
<i>CNN</i>	

Table 3.3 shows that even in the last years of his presidency, almost 30% of Americans believed that he was Muslim, likely due to the early version of the birtherism theory.

Research centers also tracked the effects of birtherism's later claims that he was born outside of the United States and therefore ineligible to serve as president. The following polls show how many individuals believed that Obama was born outside of the United States throughout his presidency as well as the level of media coverage during birtherism's two-month high point in 2011.

Table 3.4: Nationwide Poll - September 9, 2009²⁷⁶

<i>Do you think Barack Obama was born in the United States?</i>	
Yes	59%
No	23%
Not Sure	18%
<i>Public Policy Polling</i>	

²⁷⁵ "Iran Poll." *CNN*, 13 Sep. 2015, <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2015/images/09/12/iranpoll.pdf>

²⁷⁶ Jensen, Tom. "Obama's approval steady." *Public Policy Polling*, 23 Sep. 2009, <https://www.publicpolicypolling.com/polls/obamas-approval-steady/>.

According to table 3.4, towards the end of Obama’s first year as president, nearly a quarter of Americans believed Obama was born in another country, and another 18% did not know what to believe.

A year and a half later, birtherism hit a high point when Donald Trump started touting the theory to multiple news outlets.²⁷⁷ Table 3.5 highlights the percentage of Americans that believed Obama was born in the United States during the birtherism media blitz and after Obama released his long-form birth certificate.

Table 3.5: Nationwide Poll - April - May 2011²⁷⁸

<i>Do you think Barack Obama was born in the United States?</i>		
	April 20-23, 2011 (Before Birth Cert Release)	May 5-8, 2011 (After Release)
Definitely	38%	47%
Probably	18%	18%
Definitely Not	9%	8%
Probably Not	15%	5%
Unsure	19%	20%
<i>USA Today/Gallup</i>		

Table 3.5 shows that the media blitz did not raise the percentage of birtherism believers from the 2009 numbers. However, it does show that Obama’s actions to end the rumors by releasing his long-form birth certificate had a sizable impact on those who

²⁷⁷ Mooney, Alexander. “Trump Says He Has Doubts about Obama's Birth Place.”

²⁷⁸ Newport, Frank. “Americans' Beliefs About Obama's Birth.” *Gallup*, 27 Apr. 2011, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/169724/americans-beliefs-obama-birth.aspx>; Morales, Lymari. “Obama's Birth Certificate Convinces Some, but Not All, Skeptics.” *Gallup*, 13 May 2011, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/147530/obama-birth-certificate-convinces-not-skeptics.aspx>.

believed that he was “probably not” born in the United States. Figures 3.3 and 3.4 illustrate the media coverage of the Obama’s birth certificate release.

Figure 3.3: Nationwide Poll - April 25-May 1, 2011²⁷⁹

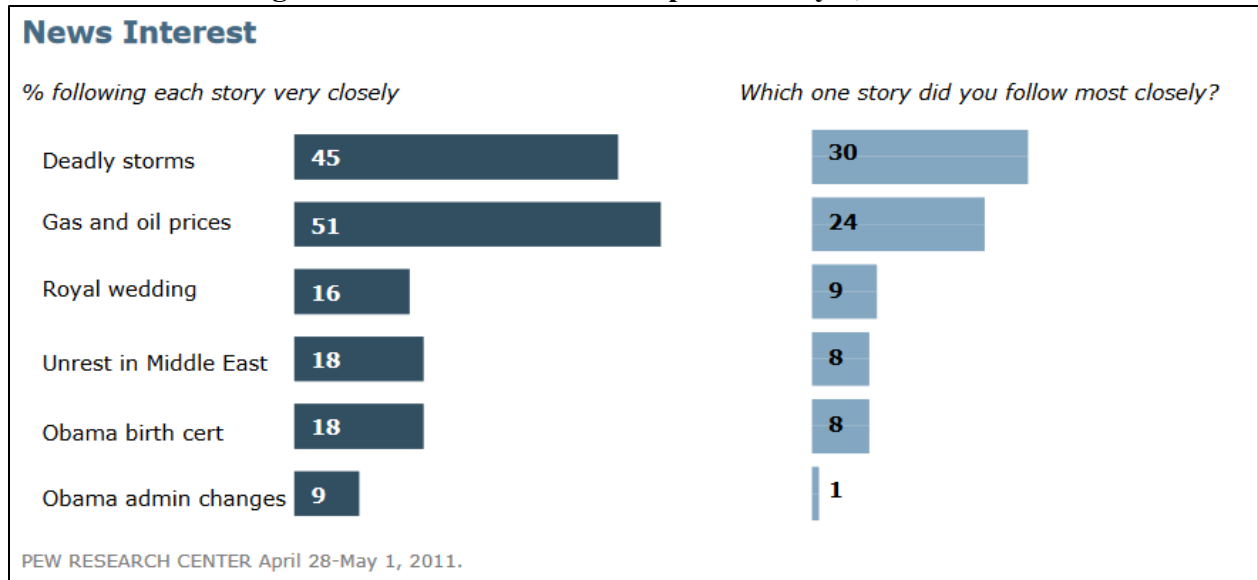
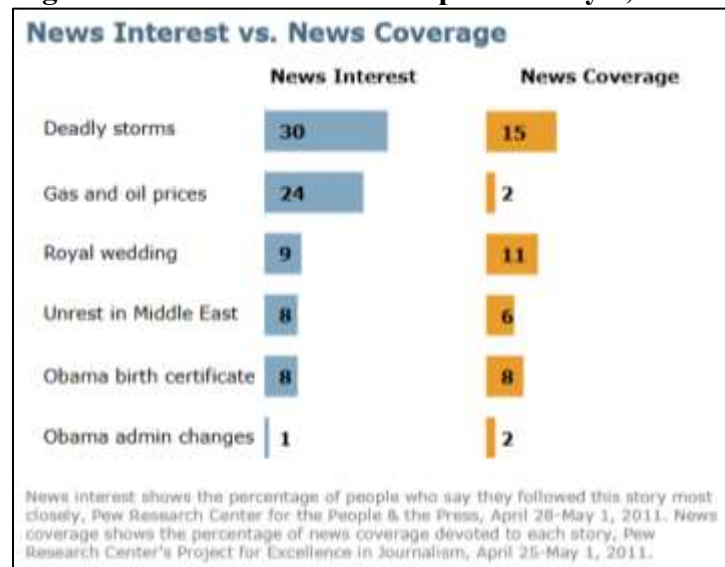


Figure 3.4: Nationwide Poll - April 28-May 1, 2011²⁸⁰



²⁷⁹ Kohut, Andrew, and Remez Michael. “Too Much Coverage: Birth Certificate, Royal Wedding.” *Pew Research Center*, 3 May 2011, <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/legacy-pdf/5-3-11%20NII%20final.pdf>

²⁸⁰ Kohut, Andrew, and Remez Michael. “Too Much Coverage: Birth Certificate, Royal Wedding.”

Figures 3.3 and 3.4 show that the Americans were twice as interested in Obama's long-form birth certificate release than they were in his Administration changes and the news media covered the release more than they covered important issues like rising gas and oil prices, Middle East turmoil, and Obama Administration changes.

The final two polls in Tables 3.6 and 3.7 show the percentage of Americans that continued to believe that Obama was born in another country in the last two years of his presidency. Table 3.6 shows the percentage of Americans overall and Table 3.7, on the next page, shows the number of Republicans versus the number of Democrats who believed the theory.

Table 3.6: Nationwide Poll – September 4-8, 2015²⁸¹

<i>As far as you know, where was Barack Obama born?</i>	
Honolulu/Hawaii	59%
United States	16%
Another Country	13%
Africa	4%
Kenya	4%
Middle East	1%
Indonesia/Other Asia	1%
Other	2%
No Opinion	12%
<i>CNN</i>	

²⁸¹ "Iran Poll."

Table 3.7: Nationwide Poll - June 27-July 5, 2016²⁸²

<i>Do you think Barack Obama was born in the United States?</i>	
Democrats:	
Yes	80%
No	10%
Unsure	10%
Republicans:	
Yes	27%
No	41%
Unsure	31%
<i>NBC News</i>	

Table 3.6 shows that a steady percentage of individuals (13%) believed that Obama was born abroad from the release of his long-form birth certificate until the end of his presidency. Table 3.7 shows that at least 10% of his own party believed that he was born abroad and over 40% of Republicans continued to believe the theory.

Analysis and Discussion

The data collected reveals four noteworthy results: the conspiracy theory inspired public doubt, it was used as political fodder for both Republicans and Democrats, media coverage of it obstructed coverage of administration changes, and it prompted Obama to come forward multiple times in order to respond. Each of these findings aligns with the assumptions and expectations of previous scholars that conspiracy theories have negative effects on political discourse and public attitude.

²⁸² Clinton, Josh, and Carrie Roush. "Poll: Persistent Partisan Divide Over 'Birther' Question." *NBC News*, 10 Aug. 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/poll-persistent-partisan-divide-over-birther-question-n627446>.

Public Doubt

The natural-born citizen clause of the United States Constitution requires that any person who runs for the office of president or vice president of the United States be a naturally-born citizen.²⁸³ Polling data between 2009 and 2011 show that almost one-quarter of the nation believed that Obama was not born in the United States and was therefore ineligible to serve as president.²⁸⁴

This aligns with findings that conspiracy theories can erode political trust.²⁸⁵ As Table 3.1 showed, in 2008, 12% of voters who did not want to see Obama elected claimed that their reasoning was that he was Muslim and 15% claimed that it was because they did not trust him. Similarly, Table 3.2 showed that this effect was attributed mostly to Obama's Democratic and independent voting blocs. While Obama was ultimately elected president, early birtherism clearly left a large impact with potential voters thus hurting his campaign.

Before the campaign for his second term even began, political allies and even future opponents came forward in an effort to clear his name. In 2011, both Bill Clinton and Mitt Romney met with media outlets in order to defend Obama and attempt to restore civil discourse.

In Tables 3.5, 3.6, and 3.7, we can see the continued questioning and doubt in Obama's background until the end of his presidency. This lack of trust made for an easy target and left room for politicians to wreak havoc against the president.

²⁸³ US Constitution, art. 2, sec. 1.

²⁸⁴ Jensen, Tom. "Obama's approval steady."; Newport, Frank. "Americans' Beliefs About Obama's Birth."

²⁸⁵ Jolley, Daniel, and Karen M. Douglas. "The Social Consequences of Conspiracism: Exposure to Conspiracy Theories Decreases Intentions to Engage in Politics and to Reduce One's Carbon Footprint.", 53.

Political Response

The heightened political distrust from birtherism left Obama and the Democratic Party in a vulnerable position and politicians on both sides attempted to exploit this. Even before the official delegate count in December 2008 numerous court cases were filed and quickly dismissed attempting to delegitimize the soon to be president.²⁸⁶ During the first legislative session of Obama's tenure, some Republican lawmakers attempted to pass bills that would require proof of natural citizenship for state ballots in order to appease their bases and discredit the newly elected president.²⁸⁷

As midterms approached, Democrats attempted to use the conspiracy theory to their advantage. However, when the candidates used the theory to attempt to embarrass Republican opponents, they had the negative consequence of keeping the theory alive and in public discourse. Hawaii Governor Abercrombie experienced one of the largest effects of this strategy when he declared that he would prove that Obama was born in Hawaii and then was unable to do so due to privacy laws. This eventually led to the March 2011 birtherism high point when Donald Trump began publicly touting the theory.

Birtherism became a distraction in both campaigns and during Obama's time in office. This finding highlights previous researchers' claims that conspiracy theories can affect public discourse.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁶ Jonsson, Patrik. "A Last Electoral Hurdle for Obama."

²⁸⁷ H.R. 1503 - 111th Congress: To amend the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 to require the principal campaign committee ..." 2009. Accessed August 12, 2018, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/111th-congress/house-bill/1503>; Johnson, Kirk. "Evidence Aside, State Lawmakers Debate 'Birther' Bills." *New York Times*, 21 Apr. 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/22/us/politics/22birthers.html>.

²⁸⁸ Douglas, Karen M. and Robbie M. Sutton. "Climate Change: Why the Conspiracy Theories are Dangerous." 99.

Administrative Obfuscation

Further emphasizing the damage that a theory can have on public discourse was birtherism's obfuscation of Obama's campaign policy objectives and administration changes once in office. This was first evident during an early birtherism media highpoint in his 2008 campaign when Obama released his short-form birth certificate and created a website to combat the theory. The heightened media coverage had obscured his policy objectives and distracted voters.

Later into Obama's first term, Governor Abercrombie resurfaced birtherism, leading into Donald Trump's two-month media blitz with the theory. This media blitz arguably did the most damage to Obama's political objectives. When Donald Trump resurfaced the birtherism issue in March 2011, Obama clearly felt as though it impeded and obscured important political issues that he was working on with his administration. While he had addressed the theory indirectly before, this time he addressed it directly. He not only felt the need to officially release his long-form birth certificate, but he also gave a speech and discussed the issue. In that speech, he stated that the theory was obfuscating important political issues and changing the discourse to an absurd topic.

Media Coverage

The obfuscation of important political issues can also be seen in the numbers derived from the media coverage charts in Figures 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4, concerning the coverage of early rumors that Obama was Muslim and the release of his long-form birth certificate. Figure 3.2 shows that in June 2008, almost 30% of news coverage concerned Obama's religion. Figures 3.3 and 3.4 show that in late April 2011, coverage of the birth certificate release beat out important political issues such as oil and gas prices, Middle East unrest, and administration

changes. The public was also twice as interested in the birth certificate release as it was in administration changes.

The increased media coverage likely explains the release of both Obama's short-form and long-form birth certificates.

Conclusion

The birtherism conspiracy theory followed Barack Obama from his years in the Senate through his tenure as president of the United States and even into Donald Trump's presidency. What effect can a conspiracy theory like that have on a politician's candidacy and administration? It did not prevent the election of Obama in either 2008 or 2012, but it did sow doubt in the electorate and obfuscate issues that he wanted to address with seriousness and urgency. The theory ultimately pushed Obama to come forward twice with his birth certificate, create a website fighting the rumor, and speak directly against it. These findings concur with the current assumptions and studies by previous scholars that conspiracy theory can have a damaging effect on political discourse and public attitude.

Because conspiracy theories have not been studied as extensively as other types of disinformation, there is more opportunity for research into their effects. Birtherism was chosen due to the amount of polling that existed surrounding the theory. Future research could be conducted on other theories, especially theories surrounding gun violence in America and what effect that has on gun legislation.

During the research process, I also noticed a trend that was out of the scope of the chapter. This trend indicated that many birtherism believers were eventual supporters of Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential elections. Future research could be done to identify how conspiracy theories could be used to unite a political base to either elect an individual or

garner support for a policy change. Conspiracy theory and paranoia are intertwined with the American people and their government and will likely provide fertile areas of research for years to come.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to highlight how disinformation can affect politics through alternative information streams. Based on historical explanatory research of six different cases, it can be concluded that alternative information streams have the ability to affect public opinion through emotions and entertainment. These forms of communication can sway public opinion, elections, and even policy agenda.

The research in this section paints a concerning path for the future of America in a post-truth world. Disinformation delivers far more potent emotions and reactions than the truth, leaving stronger feelings with those that it crosses. This thesis covered the effects of three types of alternative information streams, soft news, memes, and conspiracy theories, and showed how these streams affect the American political process.

Summary of Findings

Chapter one took a look at soft news through the study of two events. The first event looked at comedian Jimmy Kimmel and his plea to save the ACA in 2017. The second event looked at comedian John Oliver's plea to protect net neutrality from the FCC's plan to abolish it. Both of these scenarios revealed a capacity for soft news to influence a policy.

This research drew noteworthy conclusions, most of which aligned with previous research, but also highlighted soft news's capability for disinformation. First, soft news hosts displayed an ability to draw attention to political issues, even amongst viewers of differing political views. Kimmel's liberal-leaning monologues on healthcare actually drew in a larger audience without scaring away his unusually high Republican audience. The clip of Oliver's

rant was so useful for calling attention to net neutrality that grassroots organizations used it to drum up public interest.

Second, the comedians educated viewers on their respective issues. The entertainment format of their shows provided a passive learning environment for viewers while the hosts delivered informational content. Kimmel even coordinated with Democratic senators to deliver talking points and details of the proposed bills to his growing audience. While Oliver's audience was found to be three times more likely to be well informed on the topic than the general public.

Next, the hosts were able to affect attitudes and inspire actions related to their issues. Kimmel became a trusted public source on the issue of healthcare. By the vote deadline, the majority of Americans did not want the ACA overturned. Oliver, on the other hand, was able to inspire a significant amount of action. His rant led to thousands of comments on the FCC website, potentially crashing it early on.

Finally, while these two scenarios show soft news's potential for positive information sharing, as previous research indicated, it also showed a potential for disinformation. Oliver's show was meticulously fact-checked and brought light to an issue that grassroots organizations had previously found difficult to sell to the American public. Oliver's format showed the potential for soft news to help educate the public. Kimmel's segment, however, was far less strict in its adherence to the truth. Kimmel frequently misconstrued the statements of a Republican Senator that came onto his show and coordinated with Democratic leadership to sell his message. Unlike a hard-news journalist that has to live up to journalistic integrity, Kimmel did not have to correct his statements. While Kimmel's

comments were not completely egregious in comparison to the claims of other disinformation narratives, it shows soft news's potential to act as a disinformation channel.

In this chapter, the two hosts and scenarios were specifically chosen due to the amount of polling information available and the number of public responses from politicians. Therefore, the lack of polling information surrounding typical soft news programs limited this research.

The next chapter looked at memes as propaganda through the study of three movements. Through the study of the Occupy Wall Street movement, the alt-right, and Russia's IRA, this research revealed that memes are tools in political communication. Four conclusions came out of this research that align with previous research.

First, memes were not a secondary bi-product of the three movements but were used intentionally by the leaders of the three movements as tools of political communication and grassroots action. The leaders of the three movements understood that they needed to subvert the traditional media to spread their messages. Memes typically spread from person to person through social media, allowing for this type of subversion.

Second, memes were used to recruit and unite followers to a unified ideology. Because the memes spread from person to person, they were far more likely to find like-minded individuals. Through the spread of memes, individuals with similar beliefs could find others with similar ideologies. In the Occupy movement, this helped the ideas to spread all over the world and start local movements in over 80 countries. In the alt-right movement, it showed people with marginalized viewpoints that other people felt the same way they did

and then gave them a format to participate. The IRA capitalized off of this and used memes to attract people to its pages to share disinformation about the elections.

Third, memes were used as a form of public discourse. Detractors from the Occupy movement quickly joined the debate and mocked the group's memes with similar memes of their own. The alt-right used memes to counter the mainstream narrative on race by going intentionally too far, aligning their memes with the Nazi party. The IRA used memes to fuel antagonism in ongoing debates by sharing memes that aligned with both sides.

Finally, while memes are a form of political participation on their own, they also acted as a gateway to more forms of political participation. The spread of memes in the Occupy movement inspired protests around the world. For the alt-right, memes showed followers that there were more people out there like them, leading to rallies and eventually violent acts. For Russia, memes were intended to be a gateway to more participation in rallies and protests, but less participation in voting.

While some people have never seen a meme, others scroll through long lists of them many times a day. Memes are digested on a personal and intimate scale, complicating the study of their effects on political opinion forming. This study was therefore limited to the study of the motivations behind their use and the observable effects.

The third chapter focused on conspiracy theories through the study of a single theory, birtherism. This theory followed President Obama from his time as a Senator through his presidency. This research added to the limited amount of research on conspiracy and revealed three noteworthy results. These results aligned with previous research on conspiracy theories and added new connections in the relationship between a conspiracy and public policy.

First, as previous research predicted, the conspiracy theory eroded public trust. Many voters that did not want to see Obama elected claimed the theory as their reasoning. This effect was more prevalent in his own party and of Independents. Therefore, while he was eventually elected, his numbers were likely hurt by the theory.

Second, the theory was weaponized by both sides in order to garner support. Instead of dismissing the theory outright, some Republicans and Democrats chose to use the theory to their advantage. Birtherism was used to gain support, delegitimize the president, and distract from his narrative. This insight adds to previous research by highlighting conspiracy theory's ability to be used intentionally as a political tool.

Third, the media coverage of the theory obfuscated and distracted from Obama's campaign and policy objectives. During his 2008 campaign, Obama was forced to fight the theory head-on by posting his birth certificate online and creating a website to explain away the theory. Towards the end of the first term, he had to face the theory again when Donald Trump started touting the theory in the news. The media blitz over the theory distracted from important foreign policy issues that Obama wanted the public to focus on. This time, Obama released his long-form birth certificate and addressed the theory in a speech in order to end it. This insight shows how a conspiracy theory could potentially be used to distract from an opponent's narrative.

Because conspiracy theories have not been studied as extensively as other types of disinformation, there is more opportunity for research into their effects. However, in an effort to cover one conspiracy theory more substantially, this section only looked into one theory which limited the results to one case.

These three chapters follow three different alternative information streams that often merge and overlap. The three types of disinformation streams all root themselves in entertainment and emotion. Soft news entertains and arouses feelings of political enthusiasm or, conversely, cynicism; internet memes stimulates laughter or anger; and conspiracy theories inspire fear.

The problem of disinformation through these streams is not new though. Late-night comedy sketches that included political jokes and observations dates back at least to the 1950s.²⁸⁹ In World War I, governments used imagery propaganda to influence foreign and domestic citizens, similar to political internet memes today.²⁹⁰ Finally, as mentioned in chapter three, conspiracy theories are intertwined in the American story, tracing back to colonial times. What is new, however, is the speed and distance that these forms of disinformation can travel today. With the internet and social media, soft news clips, memes, and conspiracy theories are shared with the click of a mouse and digested in seconds. Because of this, we must look towards the relationship between the internet and disinformation.

Future research should be conducted on this relationship. Researchers could look at different types of social networking sites to evaluate which types of sites are more vulnerable to disinformation spreading. Future research should also look at the types of regulations that are most successful at hindering the spread of disinformation without encroaching on free speech.

²⁸⁹ Yahr, Emily. "Charting the insanity of late-night TV over the years. There's been some drama." *Washington Post*. 1 May 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2014/05/01/charting-the-insanity-of-late-night-tv-over-the-years-theres-been-some-drama/>

²⁹⁰ Welch, David. "Propaganda for patriotism and nationalism." *British Library*. 29 Jan. 2014, <https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/patriotism-and-nationalism>

Going Forward in the “Post Truth” Era

Based on these findings and the concerning nature of post-truth politics, policymakers should consider the importance of internet regulation and education going forward. As of the end of 2018, just over half of the world was online.²⁹¹ As those numbers increase, so will the problems.

Social media sites have already taken a step in tackling this problem. In late 2016, Facebook began removing fake accounts from their site and began working with Twitter and Google to identify other threats.²⁹² Facebook also implemented a new crowd-sourced fact-checker that allowed users to identify false information. False information was then labeled and demoted in users’ newsfeeds.²⁹³

Further efforts were made to combat election-related disinformation. Prior to elections around the world, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter set up teams to identify and disrupt disinformation campaigns.²⁹⁴ Facebook also added a new requirement to advertisements that notated who paid for the ad.²⁹⁵ However, in October 2019, Democratic presidential candidate, Elizabeth Warren, showed how broken this process was when she

²⁹¹ “New ITU statistics show more than half the world is now using the Internet.” *ITU News*. 6 Dec. 2018, <https://news.itu.int/itu-statistics-leaving-no-one-offline/>

²⁹² Isaac, Mike, and Daisuke Wakabayashi. “Russian Influence Reached 126 Million Through Facebook Alone.”

²⁹³ Kan, Michael. “Facebook turns to crowdsourcing, fact-checkers to fight fake news.” *ComputerWorld*. 15 Dec. 2016, <https://www.computerworld.com/article/3151055/facebook-turns-to-crowdsourcing-fact-checkers-to-fight-fake-news.html>

²⁹⁴ Barrett, Paul M. “Disinformation and the 2020 Election: How the Social Media Industry Should Prepare.” *NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights*. 1 Sep. 2019, https://issuu.com/nyusterncenterforbusinessandhumanri/docs/nyu_election_2020_report, 14.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

posted a completely and intentionally false political advertisement on the site. Facebook then refused to take down the ad because it did not want to censor speech.²⁹⁶

Research on the success of these approaches has shown conflicting results. Some studies show that disinformation is increasing online, while others show a decrease in the spread of this information.²⁹⁷ Either way, more needs to be done to show a definitive result.

In 2019, New York University Stern Center for Business and Human Rights put forward further recommendations for an American approach to disinformation online. This approach mostly aimed at America's powerful social media companies, but also gave recommendations for government oversight. Most importantly, social media sites need to allocate more funding towards this issue and appoint content overseers. These overseers could help defend against disinformation by removing provably false content and highlighting problem areas.²⁹⁸ Social media sites must also engage in industry-wide collaboration in order to identify threats faster and more accurately.²⁹⁹

The government has a larger part to play as well. Congress has the ability to create and support legislation that would require social media companies to step up to this challenge. It also has the ability to direct social media literacy campaigns to help citizens identify false information.³⁰⁰

Due to the global nature of online disinformation, America's efforts alone are not enough. A global, collaborative approach is needed to truly combat this trend. Countries

²⁹⁶ Kang, Cecilia, and Thomas Kaplan. "Warren Dares Facebook with Intentionally False Political Ad." *New York Times*. 12 Oct. 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/12/technology/elizabeth-warren-facebook-ad.html>

²⁹⁷ Barrett, Paul M. "Disinformation and the 2020 Election: How the Social Media Industry Should Prepare."

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

around the world are currently looking at different ways to combat the trend of disinformation online. From internet shutdowns and arrests to task forces and media literacy campaigns, each country has a different approach.³⁰¹

In 2018, the European Commission started this effort by creating a high-level group of experts (HLEG) to advise on the issue. This group found five approaches to fight disinformation online. First, news sites must enhance the transparency of their data sources. Second, governments must foster media and information literacy and arm internet users with the ability to better discern disinformation from real news. Third, government and social media sites must work together to empower users and journalists with the ability to report and mitigate disinformation online. Fourth, the government should encourage diversity and sustainability of real news sites. Finally, the government should foster continued research on disinformation.³⁰²

A national and international approach to combatting disinformation is important to the health of American democracy. Americans need to learn how to separate the truth from disinformation, whether it is online or on their televisions. While the work being done to fight disinformation campaigns is important, education will be increasingly important to fight the small lies hidden in soft news and memes.

³⁰¹ Funke, Daniel, and Daniela Flamini. "A guide to anti-misinformation actions around the world." *Poynter*. Mar. 2018, <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/anti-misinformation-actions/>

³⁰² European Commission. "Final report of the High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation." 21 Mar. 2018, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>

In 1992, during the height of late-night comedy shows and before Facebook, Twitter, and racist cartoon frogs, Steve Tesich, a Serbian-American playwright, wrote a prophetic essay on the future of politics in America.³⁰³ In this essay, Tesich lamented:

We are rapidly becoming prototypes of a people that totalitarian monsters could only drool about in their dreams. All the dictators up to now have had to work hard at suppressing the truth. We, by our actions, are saying that this is no longer necessary, that we have acquired a spiritual mechanism that can denude truth of any significance. In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world.³⁰⁴

Tesich's words ring eerily true 27 years later and leave a grim outlook for our nation's future. But just as new standards of truth and integrity were formed after the invention of the printing press, so too will new standards be created in the internet age. As a nation with some of the largest and most influential internet companies, we have the power to begin the groundwork for those new standards. Standards that reflect integrity and freedom first amendment and the spirit of the American people.

³⁰³ Kreitner, Richard. "Post-Truth and Its Consequences: What a 25-Year-Old Essay Tells Us About the Current Moment." *The Nation*. 30 Nov. 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/post-truth-and-its-consequences-what-a-25-year-old-essay-tells-us-about-the-current-moment/>

³⁰⁴ Tesich, Steve. "A Government of Lies." *The Nation*. Vol. 254, No. 1, 6 Jan. 1992, <https://www.questia.com/magazine/1G1-11665982/a-government-of-lies>

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Curriculum Vita

Jillian B. Donovan

EDUCATION

Bachelor of Science (December 2012) in Anthropology, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas.

Associate in Applied Science (November 2011) in Intelligence Studies and Technology, Community College of the Air Force, Maxwell Gunter AFB, Alabama.

EMPLOYMENT

Intelligence Research Specialist, Customs and Border Protection (CBP), (October 2017 – Present). Responsibilities include: intelligence analysis, data processing and visualization, briefing and training of field officers, and foreign partner coordination.

Intelligence Analysis Specialist, Transportation Security Administration (TSA), (July 2016 – October 2017). Responsibilities included: intelligence analysis, regulation drafting and proposals, briefing and training, and presentations to congressional, legal, and privacy offices.

Interagency Liaison, National Security Agency (NSA), (March 2014 – July 2016). Responsibilities included: intelligence research and analysis, assisting senior leadership with interagency collaboration and coordination, briefing and training of intelligence analysts, and memoranda drafting and processing.

Signals Intelligence Analyst, United States Air Force, (December 2005 – September 2016). Responsibilities included: intelligence analysis, cyber warfare analysis, briefing, tactical report writing, and supervisory duties.

AWARDS

Air Force Achievement Medal (2010, 2016)
Most Impactful TDY Kansas Guardsman of the Year Award (2016)
NSA Reserve Forces Directorate – Reservists of the Quarter (2015)
Kansas Guard Achievement Medal (2013)